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LEARS:

A PASTORAL
OF NORWAY.

BY BAYARD TAYLOR.

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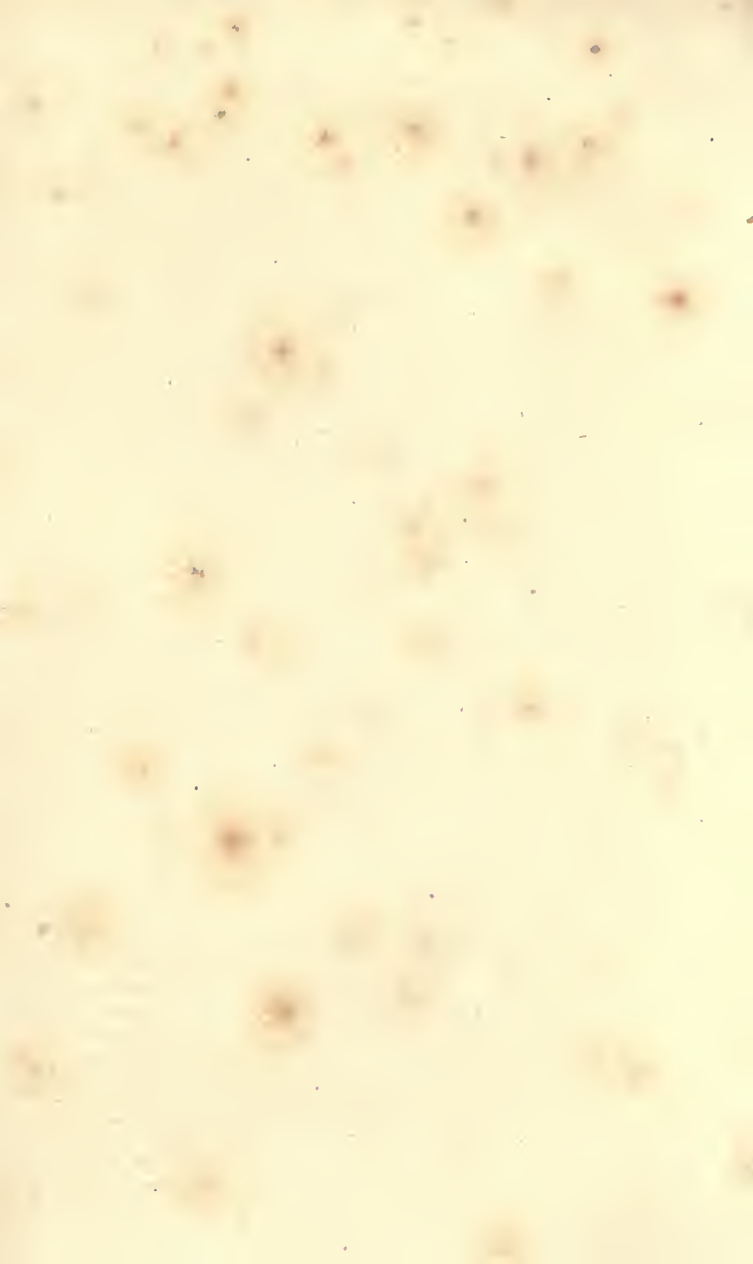
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With much love,
Your friend
H. F. James

May 1st 1920.



L A R S.



L A R S :

A PASTORAL OF NORWAY.

BY

BAYARD TAYLOR.



BOSTON :
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY,
LATE TICKNOR & FIELDS, AND FIELDS, OSGOOD, & Co.

1873.

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TO

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER.

THROUGH many years my heart goes back,
Through checkered years of loss and gain,
To that fair landmark on its track,
When first, beside the Merrimack,
Upon thy cottage roof I heard the autumn rain.

A hand that welcomed and that cheered
To one unknown didst thou extend ;
Thou gavest hope to Song that feared ;
But now, by Time and Faith endeared,
I claim the sacred right to call the Poet, Friend !

DEDICATION.

However Life the stream may stain,
From thy pure fountain drank my youth
The simple creed, the faith humane
In Good, that never can be slain,
The prayer for inward Light, the search for outward
Truth!

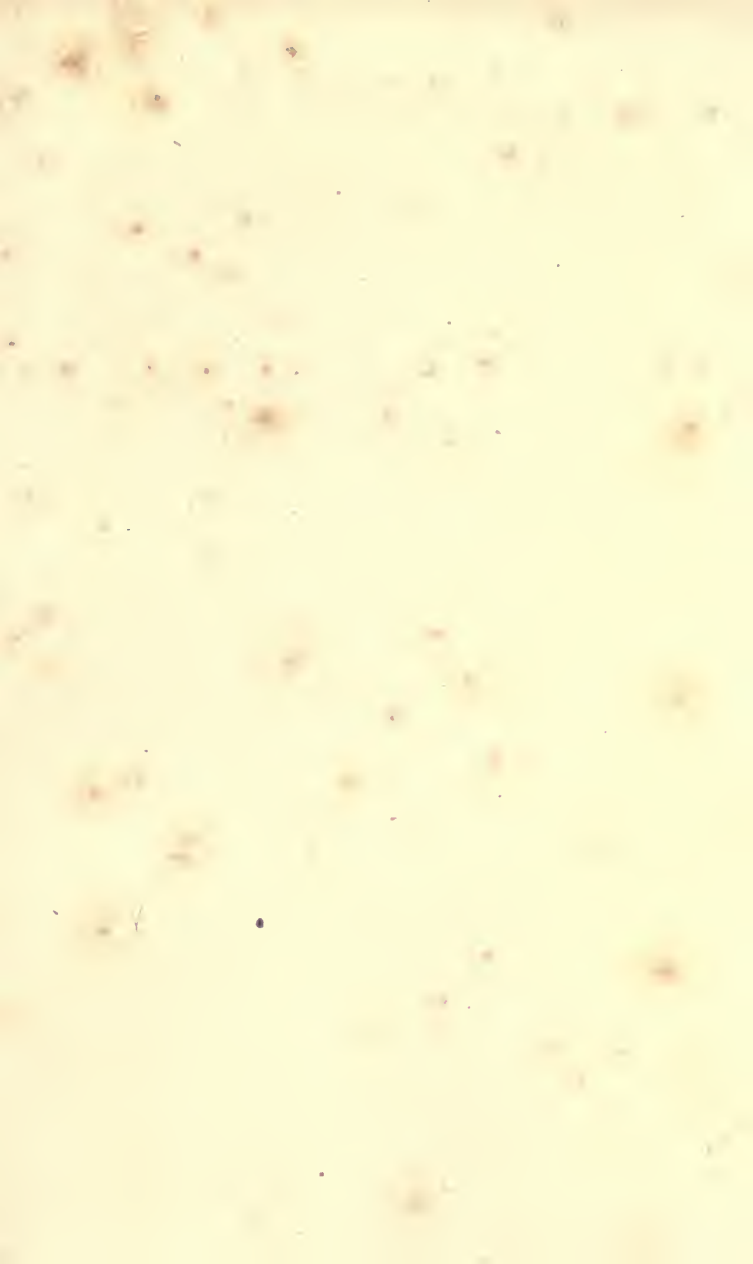
Like thee, I see at last prevail
The sleepless soul that looks above ;
I hear, far off, the hymns that hail
The Victor, clad in heavenly mail,
Whose only weapons are the eyes and voice of Love !

Take, then, these olive leaves from me,
To mingle with thy brighter bays !
Some balm of peace and purity,
In them, may faintly breathe of thee ;
And take the grateful love, wherein I hide thy praise !

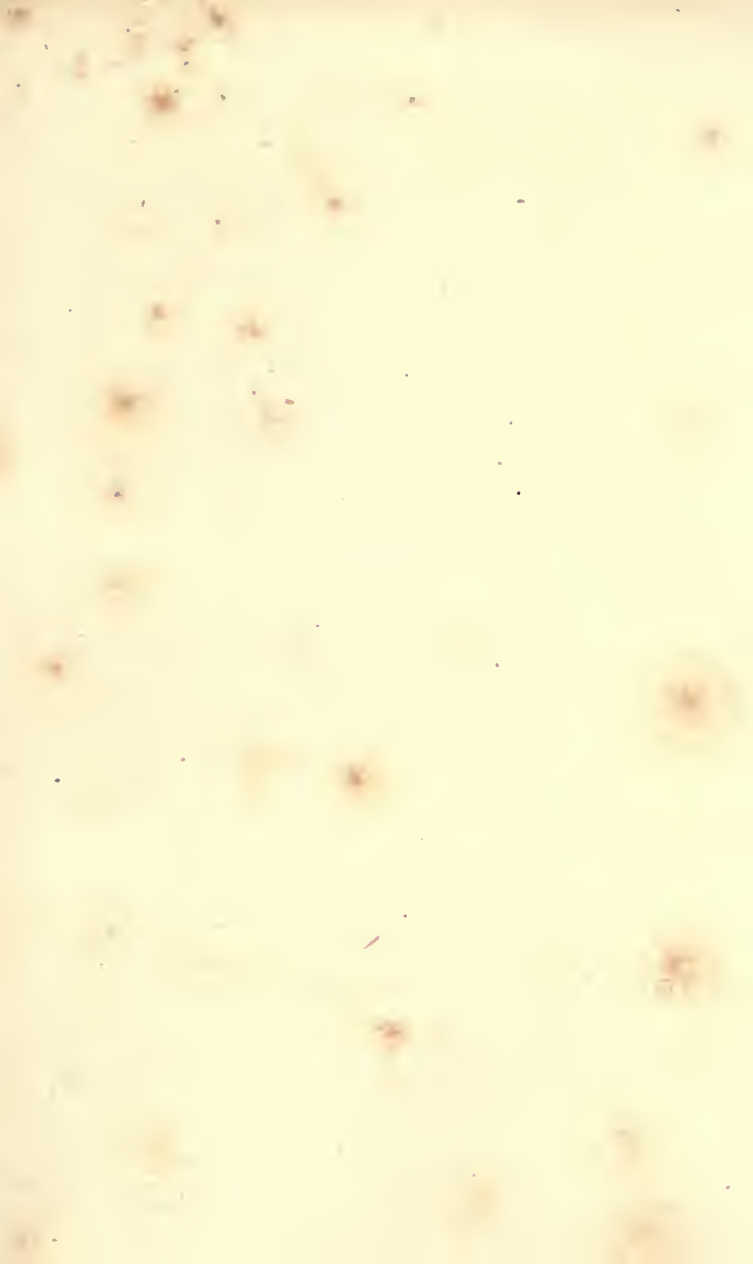
B. T.

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BOOK I.



BOOK I.

On curtained eyes, and bosoms warm with rest,
On slackened fingers, and unburdened feet,
On limbs securer slumber held from toil,
While nimble spirits of the busy blood
Renewed their suppleness, yet filled the trance
With something happy which was less than dream,
The sun of Sabbath rose. Two hours, afar,
Behind the wintry peaks of Justedal,
Unmarked, he climbed ; then, pausing on the crest
Of Fille Fell, he gathered up his beams
Dissolved in warmer blue, and showered them down
Between the mountains, through the falling vale,
On Ulvik's cottages and orchard trees.

And one by one the chimneys breathed ; the sail
That loitered lone along the misty fiord
Flashed like a star, and filled with fresher wind ;
The pasturing steers, dispersed on grassy slopes,
Raised heads of wonder over hedge and wall
To call, unanswered, the belated cows ;
And ears that would not hear, or heard in dreams,
The lark's alarum over idle fields,
And lids, still sweetly shut, that else unclosed
At touch of daybreak, yielded to the day.

Then, last of all, among the maidens, met
To dip fresh faces in the chilly fount,
And smoothen braids of sleep-entangled hair,
Came Brita, glossy as a mating bird.
No need had she to stoop and wash awake
Her drowsy senses : air and water kissed
A face as bright and breathing as their own,

In joy of life and conscious loveliness.
 If still her mirror's picture stayed with her,
 A memory, whispering how the downcast lid
 Shaded the flushing fairness of her cheek,
 And hinting how a straying lock relieved
 The rigid fashion of her hair, or how
 The curve of slightly parted lips became
 Half-sad, half-smiling, either meaning much
 Or naught, as wilful humor might decide, —
 Yet thence was born the grace she could not
 lose :

Her beauty, guarded, kept her beautiful.

“Wilt soon be going, Brita?” Ragnil asked ;
 “And which the way, — by fiord or over fell?”
 “Why, both !” another laughed ; “or else the rocks
 Will split and slide beneath the feet of Lars,
 Or Per will meet the Kraken !” Brita held

L A R S.

One dark-brown braid between her teeth, and
wove

The silken twine and tassels through its fringe,
Before she spake ; but first she seemed to sigh :
“ I will not choose ; you shall not spoil my day !
All paths are free that lead across the fell ;
All wakes are free to keels upon the fiord,
And even so my will : come Lars or Per,
Come Eric, Anders, Harald, Olaf, Nils,
Come søeter-boys, or sailors from the sea,
No lass is bound to slight a decent lad,
Or walk behind him when the way is wide.”

“ No way is wide enough for three, I ’ve heard,”
Said Ragnil, “ save there be two men that prop
A third, when market ’s over.”

“ Go your ways !”

Then Brita cried : “ if two or twelve should come,

I call them not, nor do I bid them go :

A friendly word is no betrothal ring."

Then tossed she back her braids, and with them
tossed

Her wilful head. " Why, take you both, or 'all ! "

She said, and left them, adding, " if you can ! "

With silent lips, nor cared what prudent fears,

Old-fashioned wisdom, dropped in parrot-words,

Chattered behind her as she climbed the lane.

Along her path the unconverted bees

Set toil to music, and the elder-flowers

Bent o'er the gate a snowy entrance-arch,

Where, highest on the slope, her cottage sat.

Her bed of pinks there yielded to the sun

Its clove and cinnamon odors ; sheltered there

Beneath the eaves, a rose-tree nursed its buds,

And through the door, across the dusk within,

She saw her grandam set the morning broth
And cut a sweeter loaf. All breathed of peace,
Of old, indulgent love, and simple needs,
Yet Brita sighed, — then blushed because she sighed.

“Dear Lord!” the ancient dame began, “’t is just
The day, the sun, the breeze, the smell of flowers,
As fifty years ago, in Hallingdal,
When I, like thee, picked out my smartest things,
And put them on, half guessing what would hap,
And found my luck before I took them off.
See! thou shalt wear the brooch, my mother’s then,
And thine when I am gone. Some luck, who
knows?

May still be shining in the fair red stone.”
So, from a box that breathed of musky herbs,
She took the boss of roughly fashioned gold,
With garnets studded: took, but gave not yet.

Some pleasure in the smooth, cool touch of gold,
Or wine-red sparkles, flickering o'er the stones,
Or dream of other fingers, other lips
That kissed them for the bed they rocked upon
That happy summer eve in Hallingdal,
Gave her slow heart its girlhood's pulse again,
Her cheek one last leaf of its virgin rose.

O, foolishness of age! She dared not say
What then she felt: Go, child, enjoy the bliss
Of innocent woman, ripe for need of man,
And needing him no less! Some natural art
Will guide thy guileless fancies, some pure voice
Will whisper truth, and lead thee to thy fate!
But, ruled by ancient habit, counselled thus:
"Be on thy guard, my Brita! men are light
Of tongue, and unto faces such as thine
Mean not the half they say: the girl is prized

Who understands their ways, and holds them off
Till he shall come, who, facing her, as she
And death were one, pleads for his life with her :
When such an one thou meetest, thou wilt know."

"Nay, grandam!" Brita said; "I will not hear
A voice so dreadful-earnest: I am young,
And I can give and take, not meaning much,
Nor over-anxious to seem death to men:
I like them all, and they are good to me.
I'll wear thy brooch, and may it bring me luck,
Not such as thine was, as I guess it was,
But, in the kirk, short sermon, cheerful hymn,
Good neighbors on the way, and for the dance
A light-foot partner!" With a rippling laugh
That brushed the surface of her heart, and hid
Whatever doubt its quiet had betrayed,
She kissed the withered cheek, and on her breast

Pinned the rough golden boss with wine-red stones.
"Come, Brita, come!" rang o'er the elder-flowers :
"I come!" she answered, threw her fleeting face
Upon the little mirror, took her bunch
Of feathered pinks, and joined the lively group
Of Sundayed lads and lasses in the lane.

They set themselves to climb the stubborn fell
By stony stairs that left the fields below,
And ceased, far up, against the nearer blue.
But lightly sprang the maids ; and where the slides
Of ice ground smooth the slanting planes of rock,
Strong arms drew up and firm feet steadied theirs.
Here lent the juniper a prickly hand,
And there they grasped the heather's frowsy hair,
While jest and banter made the giddy verge
Secure as orchard-turf ; and none but showed
The falcon's eye that guides the hunter's foot,

LARS.

Till o'er their flushed and breathless faces struck
The colder ether ; on the crest they stood,
And sheltered vale and ever-winding fiord
Sank into gulfs of shadow, while afar
To eastward many a gleaming tooth of snow
Cut the full round of sky.

“ Why, look you, now ! ”

Cried one ; “ the fiord is bare as threshing-floor
When winter's over : what's become of Per ? ”
“ And what of Lars ? ” asked Ragnil, with a glance
At Brita's careless face ; “ can he have climbed
The Evil Pass, and crossed the thundering foss,
His nearest way ? ” As clear as blast of horn
There came a cry, and on the comb beyond
They saw the sparkle of a scarlet vest.
Then, like the echo of a blast of horn,
A moment later, fainter and subdued,
A second cry ; and far to left appeared

LARS.

A form that climbed and leaped, and nearer strove.
And Harald, Anders Ericssen, and Nils
Set their three voices to accordant pitch
And shouted one wild call athwart the blue,
Until it seemed to quiver : as they ceased
The maids began, and, moving onward, gave
Strong music : all the barren summits rang.

So from the shouts and girlish voices grew
The wayward chorus of a sæter-song,
Such as around the base of Skagtolstind
The chant of summer-jötun seems, when all
The herds are resting and the herdsmen meet ;
And while it swept with swelling, sinking waves
The crags and ledges, Lars had joined the band,
And from the left came Per ; and Brita walked
Between them where the path was broad, but when
It narrowed to such track as tread the sheep

LARS.

Round slanting shoulder and o'er rocky spur
To reach the rare, sweet herbage, one went close
Before her, one behind, and unto both
With equal cheer and equal kindliness
Her speech was given : so both were glad of heart.

A herdsman, woodman, hunter, Lars was strong,
Yet silent from his life upon the hills.
Beneath dark lashes gleamed his darker eyes
Like mountain-tarns that take their changeless hue
From shadows of the pine : in all his ways
He showed that quiet of the upper world
A breath can turn to tempest, and the force
Of rooted firs that slowly split the stone.
But Per was gay with laughter of the seas
Which were his home : the billow breaking blue
On the Norwegian skerries flashed again
Within his sunbright eyes ; and in his tongue,

Set to the louder, merrier key it learned
In hum of rigging, roar of wind and tide,
The rhythm of ocean and its wilful change
Allured all hearts as ocean lures the land.
Now which, this daybreak with his yellow locks,
Or yonder twilight, calm, mysterious, filled
With promise of its stars, shall turn the mind
Of the light maiden who is neither fain
To win nor lose, since, were the other not,
Then each were welcome?—how should maid decide?
For that the passion of the twain was marked,
And haply envied, and a watch was set,
She would be strong: and, knowing, seem as though
She nothing knew, until occasion came
To bid her choose, or teach her how to choose.

On each and all the soberness of morn
Yet lay, the weight of hard reality

LARS.

That even clogs the callow wings of love ;
And now descending, where the broader vale
Showed farm on farm, and groves of birch and oak,
And fields that shifted gloss like shimmering silk,
The kirk-bells called them through the mellow air,
Slow-swinging, till, as from a censer's cup
The smoke diffused makes all the minster sweet,
The peace they chimed pervaded earth and sky.
As under foliage of the lower land
The pathway led, more harmless fell the jost,
The laugh less frequent : then the maidens drew
Apart, set smooth their braids, their kirtles shook,
And grave, decorous as a troop of nuns,
Entered the little town. Ragnil alone
And Anders Ericssen together walked,
For twice already had their banns been called.
Lars shot one glance at Brita, as to say :
“ Were thou and I thus promised, side by side ! ”

LARS.

Then looked away ; but Per, who kept as near
As decent custom let, all softly sang :

“Forget me thou, I shall remember still !”

That she might hear him, and so not forget.

Thus onward to the gray old kirk they moved.

The bells had ceased to chime : the hush within

With holy shuddering from the organ-bass

Was filled, and when it died the prayer arose.

Then came another stillness, as the Lord

Were near, or bent to listen from afar,

And last the text ; but Brita found it strange.

Thus read the pastor : “Set me as a seal

Upon thy heart, yea, set me as a seal

Upon thine arm ; for love is strong as death,

And jealousy is cruel as the grave.”

She felt the garnets burn upon her breast,

As if all fervor of the olden love

Still heated them, and fire of jealousy,
 And to herself she thought: "Has any face
 Looked on me with a love as strong as death?
 But I am Life, and how am I to know?"
 Then, straightway weary of the puzzle, she
 Began to wander with her dancing thoughts
 Out o'er the fell, and up and down the slopes
 Of sunny grass, while ever and anon
 The preacher's solemn voice struck through her
 dream,
 Its sound a menace and its sense unknown.
 Then she was sad, and vexed that she was sad
 And vexed with them who only could have caused
 Her sadness: "Grandam's luck, forsooth!" she thought:
 "If one were luck, why, two by rights were more,
 But two a plague, a lesser plague were one,
 And not a fortune!" So, till service ceased,
 And all arose when benediction came,

LARS.

She mused with pettish thrust of under lip,
Nor met the yearning eyes of Lars and Per.

The day's grave duty done, forth issued all,
Foregathering with the Vossevangen youth,
The girls of Graven and the boys of Vik,
Where under elms before the guest-house front
Stood tables brown with age : already bore
The host his double-handed bunch of cans
Fresh-filled and foaming ; and the cry of *Skoal!*
Mixed with the clashing kiss of glassy lips.
But when in gown of black the pastor came,
All rose, respectful, waiting for his words.
A pace in front stood Anders Ericssen,
Undignified in bridegroom dignity,
Because too conscious : Ragnil blushed with shame,
And all the maidens envied her the shame,
When reverend fingers tapped her cheek, and he,

LARS.

That good man, said : " How fares my bonny bride ?
She must not be the last this summer ; look,
My merry lads, what harvest waits for you !"
And on the maidens turned his twinkling eyes,
That beamed a blessing with the playful words.

Then Lars slipped nearer Brita, where she stood
Withdrawn a little, underneath the trees.

" You heard the pastor," said he ; " would you next
Put on the crown ? not you the harvest, nay,
The reaper, rather ; and the grain is ripe."

" A field," she answered, " may be ripe enough
When half the heads are empty, and the stalks
Are choked with cockle. I 've no mind to reap.
Indeed, I know not what you mean : the speech
The pastor uses suits not you nor me."

She meant reproof, yet made reproof so sweet
By feigned impatience, which betrayed itself,

LARS.

That Lars bent lower, murmured with quick breath :

“ O, take my meaning, Brita ! Give me one, —

But one small word to say that you are kind,

But one kind word to tell me you are free,

And I not wholly hateful ! ” “ Lars ! ” she cried,

Her frank, sweet sympathy aroused, “ not so !

As friendly-kind as I can be, I am,

But free of you, and all ; and that ’s enough !

You men would walk across the growing grain,

And trample it because it is not ripe

Before the harvest.” Thereupon she smiled,

Sent him one dewy glance that should have been

Defiant, but a promise seemed ; then turned,

And hastening, almost brushed the breast of Per.

He caught her by the hands, that Viking’s son,

Whose fathers wore the eagle-helm, and stood

With Frithiof at the court of Angantyr,

LARS.

Or followed fair-haired Harald to the East,
Though fishing now but herring, cod, and bass,
Not men and merchant-galleys : he was red
With mead, no less than sun and briny air :
He caught her by the hands, and said, as one
Who gives command and means to be obeyed :
“ You ’ll go to Ulvik, Brita, by the fiord !
Björn brings my boat ; the wind is off the sea,
But light as from a Bergen lady’s fan :
Say, then, you ’ll go ! ”

The will within his words

Struck Brita harshly. For a moment she
Pondered refusal, then, with brightening face
Turned suddenly, and cried to all the rest :
“ How fine of Per ! we need not climb the fell :
He ’ll bear us all to Ulvik by the fiord ;
Björn brings his boat ; the wind is off the sea ! ”
And all the rest, with roaring skoal to Per,

Struck hands upon the offer; only he
For plan so friendly showed a face too grim.
He set his teeth and muttered: "Caught this
time,

But she shall pay it!" till his discontent
Passed, like a sudden squall that tears the sea,
Yet leaves a sun to smile the billows down.
His jovial nature, bred to change, was swayed
By the swift consequence of Brita's whim,
The grasp of hand, the clap of shoulder, clink
Of brimming glass, and whispers overheard
Of "Luck to Per, and Björn, and all the boys
That reap, but sow not, on the rolling fields!"
And Brita, too, no sooner punished him
Than she relented, and would fain appease;
Whence, fluttering to and fro, she kept the plan
Alive, yet made its kindness wholly Per's:
Only, when earnestly to Lars she said:

" You 'll go with us ? " he answered sullenly :

" I will not go : my way is o'er the fell. "

He did not quit them till they reached the strand,
And on the stern-deck and the prow was piled
The bright, warm freight ; then chose a dangerous
path,

A rocky ladder slanting up the crags,
And far aloft upon a foreland took
His seat, with chin upon his clenching hands,
To watch and muse, in love and hate, alone.
But they slid off upon a wind that filled
The sail, yet scarcely heeled the boat a-lee :
They seemed to rest above a hanging sky
Twixt shores that went and shores that slowly
came

In silence, and the larger shadows fell
From heaven-high walls, a darker clearness in

The air above, the firmament below,
Crossed by the sparkling creases of the sea.
Björn at the helm and Per to watch the wind,
They scarcely sailed, but soared as eagle soars
O'er Gousta's lonely peak with moveless plumes,
That, level-set, cut the blue planes of air ;
And out of stillness rose that sunset hymn
Of Sicily, the *O sanctissima* !
That swells and fluctuates like a sleepy wave.
Thus they swam on to where the fiord is curved
Around the cape, where through a southward cleft
Some wicked sprite sends down his elfish flaws.
So now it chanced : the vessel sprang, and leaned
Before the sudden strain ; but Per and Björn
Held the hard bit upon their flying steed,
And laughing, sang : " Out on the billows blue
You needs must dance, and on the billows blue
You sleep, a babe, rocked by the billows blue ! "

As suddenly the gust was over : then
Found Per a seat by Brita. "Did you fear?"
He said ; and she : "Who fears that sails with Per?"
"Nay, then," he whispered, "never fear me more,
As twice to-day : why give me all this freight,
When so much less were so much more to me?"
"Since when were maidens free as fishermen?
Not since the days of Brynhild, I believe";
She answered, sharply : "I was fain to sail,
And place for me meant place for more beside."
"Not in my heart," he said ; "it holds and keeps
Thee only ; thou canst not escape my love";
And tried to take her hand : she, bending o'er
The low, black bulwarks, saw a crimson spark
Drop on the surface of the pale-green wave,
And sink, surrounded by a golden gleam.
"O, grandam's brooch!" she cried, and started up,
Sat down again, and hid her face, and wept.

Some there lamented as the loss were theirs,
Some shook their heads in ominous dismay,
But all agreed that, save a fish should bring
The jewel in its maw (and tales declared
The thing once happened), none would see it more.
Said Guda Halstensdatter: "I should fear
An evil, had I lost it." Thorkil cried:
"Be silent, Guda! Loss is grief enough
For Brita: would you frighten her as well?
There's many think that jewels go and come,
Having some life or virtue of their own
That drives them from us or that brings them back.
'T was so with my great-grandam's wedding-ring."

"Now, how was that?" all asked; and Thorkil spake:
"Why, not a year had she been wedded, when
The ring was gone: how, where, a mystery.
It was a bitter grief, but nothing happed

Save losses, ups and downs, that come to all:
Both took their lot in patience and in hope,
And worked the harder when the luck was least.
So from the moorland and the stony brake
They won fresh fields; and now, when came around
The thirteenth harvest, and the grain was ripe
On that new land, my grandsire, then a boy,
One morn came leaping, shouting, from the field.
High in his hand he held a stalk of wheat,
And round the ripened ear, between the beards,
Hung, like a miracle, the wedding-ring !
And father heard great-grandam say it shone
So wonderful, she dropped upon her knees ;
She thought God's finger touched it, giving back.
Who knows what fish may pounce on Brita's brooch
Before it reach the bottom of the fiord,
And then, what fisher net the fish ?" Some there
Began to smile at this, and Per's blue eyes

Danced with a cheerful light, as, in the cove
Of Ulvik entered, fell his sagging sail.
No more spake Brita ; homeward up the hill
She walked alone, sobbing with grief and dread.

The world goes round : the sun sets on despair,
The morrow makes it hope. Each little life
Thinks the great axle of the universe
Turns on its fate, and finds impertinence
In joy or grief conflicting with its own.
Yet fate is woven from unnoted threads ;
Each life is centred in the life of all,
And from the meanest root some fibre runs
Which chance or destiny may intertwine
With those that feed a force or guiding thought,
To rule the world : so goes the world around.

And Brita's loss, that made all things seem dark,

Was soon outgrieved : came Anders' wedding-day
And Ragnil's, and the overshadowing joy
Of these two hearts from others drove the shade.
Forth from her home the ruddy bride advanced,
Not fair, but made so by her bridal bliss,
The tall-crown on her brow, and in her hand
The bursting nosegay : Anders, washed and sleeked,
With ribbons on his hat, from head to foot
Conscious of all he wore, each word he spake,
And every action for the day prescribed,
Stuck to her side. It was a trying time ;
But when the strange truth was declared at last
That they were man and wife, so greeted with
The cries of flute and fiddle, crack of guns,
And tossing of the blossom-brightened hats,
They breathed more freely ; and the guests were glad
That this was over, since the festival
Might now begin, and mirth be lord of all.

In Ragnil's father, Halfdan's home, the casks
 Of mead were tapped, the Dantzig brandy served
 In small old glasses, and the platters broad,
 Heaped high with salmon, cheese, and caviar,
 Tempted and soothed before the heavier meal.
 No guest in duty failed ; and Per began —
 The liquor's sting, the day's infection warm
 Upon his blood — to fix his sweetheart's word,
 Before some wind should blow it elsewhere.
 "Your hand, my Brita," stretching his, — "your hand
 For all the dances : see, my heels are light !
 I have a right to ask you for amends,
 But ask it as a kindness." "Nay," she said,
 "You have no right ; but I will dance one dance
 With you, as any other." "Will you then ?"
 He cried, and caught her sharply by the wrist :
 "I'll not be 'any other,' do you hear ?
 I'll be the one, the only one, whose foot

Keeps time with yours, my heart the tune thereto !”
 Then shouting comrades whirled him from her side,
 And Ragnil called the maids, to show her stores
 Of fine-spun linen, lavendered and cool
 In nutwood chests, her bed and canopy
 Painted with pictures of the King and Queen,
 And texts from Scripture, o’er the pillows curled
 Where she and Anders should that night repose.
 They shut the door to keep the lads without,
 Then shyly stole away ; and Brita found
 Alone, among the garden bushes, Lars.

His eyes enlarged and brightened as she came ;
 He said, in tones whose heartfelt sweetness made
 Her pulses thrill : “ I will not bind you yet :
 Dance only first with me that sœter-dance
 You learned on Graafell : Nils will play the air.
 Then take your freedom, favor whom you will.

I shall not doubt you, now and evermore."

"But, Lars" — she said, then paused ; he would not
wait :

The mirthful guests drew near. "I'll keep you, then,"

He whispered ; "till I needs must let you go.

This much will warm me on the windy fells,

Make sunshine of the mists, melt frost in dew,

And paint the rocks with roses." Could she turn

From that brave face, those calm, confiding eyes ?

Could she, in others' sight, reject the hand

Now leading to the board ? If so, too late

Decision came, for she had followed him,

And sat beside him when the horns of mead

Made their slow pilgrimage from mouth to mouth,

And while the stacks of bread sank low, the haunch

Of stall-fed ox diminished to the bone,

Till multeberries, Bergen gingerbread,

With wine of Spain, made daintier end of all.

Then, like a congress of the blackbirds, held
In ancient tree-tops on October eves,
The tables rang and clattered ; but, ere long,
Brisk hands had stripped them bare, and, turning down
The leaves, made high-backed settles by the wall.

Through all the bustle and the din were heard
The fiddle-strings of Nils, as one by one
They chirped and squeaked in dolorous complaint,
Until the bent ear and the testing bow
Found them accordant : then a flourish came
That scampered up and down the scale, and lapsed
In one long note that hovered like a bird,
Uncertain where to light ; but so not long :
It darted soon, a lark above the fells,
And spun in eddy measures. Here a pair,
And there another, took the vacant floor,
Then Lars and Brita, sweeping in the dance

LARS.

That whirled and paused, as if a mountain gust
Blew them together, tossed, and tore apart.
And ever, when the wild refrain came round,
Lars flung himself and sideways turned in air,
Yet missed no beat of music when he fell.
“By holy Olaf!” gray-haired Halfdan cried:
“There ’s not a trick we knew in good old days,
But he has caught it: so I danced myself.”

Upon the sweeping circles entered Per,
Held back, at first, and partially controlled
By them who saw the current of his wrath,
And whitherward it set; but now, when slacked
The fiery pulses of the dance, he broke
Through all, and rudely thrust himself on Lars.
“Your place belongs to me,” he hoarsely cried,—
“Your place and partner!” “Brita’s free to choose,”
Said Lars, “and may be bidden; but this floor

Is not your deck, nor are you captain mine :
 I think your throat has made your head forget."
 Lars spake the truth that most exasperates :
 His words were oil on flame, and Per resolved,
 So swayed by reckless anger, to defy
 Then, once, and wholly. "Deck or not," said he,
 "You know what right I mean : you stand where I
 Allow you not : I warn you off the field !"
 Lars turned to Brita : "Does he speak for you ?"
 She shook her head, but what with shame and fear
 Said nothing : "We have danced our soeter-dance,"
 He further spake, "and now I go : when next
 We meet at feast, I claim another such."
 "Ay, claim it, claim !" Per shouted ; "but you'll first
 Try knives with me, for blood shall run between
 Your words and will : where you go, I shall be."
 "So be it : bid your mother bring your shroud !"
 Lars answered ; and he left the marriage house.

LARS.

The folk of Ulvik knew, from many a tale
Of feud and fight, from still transmitted hates
And old Berserker madness in their blood,
What issue hung : but whoso came between
Marked that the mediation dwelt with her
Who stood between : if she would choose, why, then
The lover foiled forsooth must leave in peace
The lover favored, — further strife were vain.
But Lars was far upon the windy heights,
And Per beyond the skerries on the sea,
And Ragnil bustling busy as a wife,
That might have helped ; while those to Brita came,
More meddlesome than kind, who hurt each nerve
They touched for healing. What could she, but cry
In tears and anger : “ Shall I seek them out,
Bestow myself on one, take pride for love,
And forfeit thus all later pride in me ?
Rather refuse them both, and on myself

Turn hate of both : their knives, i' faith ! were dull
Beside your cutting tongues !" She vowed, indeed,
In moonlit midnights, when she could not sleep,
And either window framed a rival face,
That seemed to wait, with set, reproachful eyes,
To smile on neither, hold apart and off
Their fatal kindness. She repel, that drew ?
As if an open rose could will away
Its hue and scent, a lily arm its stem
With thorns, a daisy turn against the sun !

The fields were reaped ; the longer shadows thrown
From high Hardanger and the eastern range
Began to chill the vales : it was the time
When on the meadow by the lonely lake
Of Graven, from the regions round about
The young men met to hold their wrestling-match,
As since the days of Olaf they had done.

LARS.

There, too, the maids came and the older folk,
Delighting in the grip of strength and skill,
The strain of sinew, stubbornness of joint,
And urge of meeting muscles. All the place
Was thronged, and loud the cheers and laughter rang
When some old champion from a rival vale
Bent before fresher arms, and from his base
Wrenched ere he knew, fell heavily to earth.
Until the sun across the fir-trees laid
His lines of level gold, they watched the bouts ;
Then strayed by twos and threes toward the sound
Of wassail in the houses and the booths.

And Brita with her Ulvik gossips went.
Once only, when a Lærdal giant brought
Sore grief upon the men of Vik, she saw
Or seemed to see, beyond the stormy ring,
The shape of Lars ; but, scarce disquieted

If it were he, or if the twain were there,
(Since blood, she thought, must surely cool in time,)
She followed to the house upon the knoll
Where ever came and went, like bees about
Their hive's low doorway, groups of merry folk.
A mellow dusk already filled the room ;
The chairs were pushed aside, and on the stove,
As on a throne of painted clay, sat Nils.
Behold ! Lars waited there ; and as she reached
The inner circle round the dancing-floor
He moved to meet her, and began to say
“ Thanks for the last ” — when from the other side
Strode Per.

The two before her, face to face,
Stared at each other : Brita looked at them.
All three were pale ; and she, with faintest voice,
Remembering counsel of the tongues unkind,
Could only breathe : “ I know not how to choose.”

"No need!" said Lars: "I choose for you," said Per.

Then both drew off and threw aside their coats,

Their brodered waistcoats, and the silken scarves

About their necks; but Per growled "All!" and

made

His body bare to where the leathern belt

Is clasped between the breast-bone and the hip.

Lars did the same; then, setting tight the belts,

Both turned a little: the low daylight clad

Their forms with awful fairness, beauty now

Of life, so warm and ripe and glorious, yet

So near the beauty terrible of Death.

All saw the mutual sign, and understood;

And two stepped forth, two men with grizzled hair

And earnest faces, grasped the hooks of steel

In either's belt, and drew them breast to breast,

And in the belts made fast each other's hooks.

An utter stillness on the people fell

While this was done : each face was stern and
strange,

And Brita, powerless to turn her eyes,

Heard herself cry, and started : “ Per, O Per ! ”

When those two backward stepped, all saw the flash
Of knives, the lift of arms, the instant clench
Of hands that held and hands that strove to strike :
All heard the sound of quick and hard-drawn breath,
And naught beside ; but sudden red appeared,
Splashed on the white of shoulders and of arms.
Then, thighs entwined, and all the body's force
Called to the mixed resistance and assault,
They reeled and swayed, let go the guarding clutch,
And struck out madly. Per drew back, and aimed
A deadly blow, but Lars embraced him close,
Reached o'er his shoulder and from underneath
Thrust upward, while upon his ribs the knife,

Glancing, transfixed the arm. A gasp was heard :
 The struggling limbs relaxed ; and both, still bound
 Together, fell upon the bloody floor.

Some forward sprang, and loosed, and lifted them
 A little ; but the head of Per hung back,
 With lips apart and dim blue eyes unshut,
 And all the passion and the pain were gone
 Forever. "Dead !" a voice exclaimed ; then she,
 Like one who stands in darkness, till a blaze
 Of blinding lightning paints the whole broad world,
 Saw, burst her stony trance, and with a cry
 Of love and grief and horror, threw herself
 Upon his breast, and kissed his passive mouth,
 And loud lamented : "O, too late I know
 I love thee best, my Per, my sweetheart Per !
 Thy will was strong, thy ways were masterful ;
 I did not guess that love might so command !

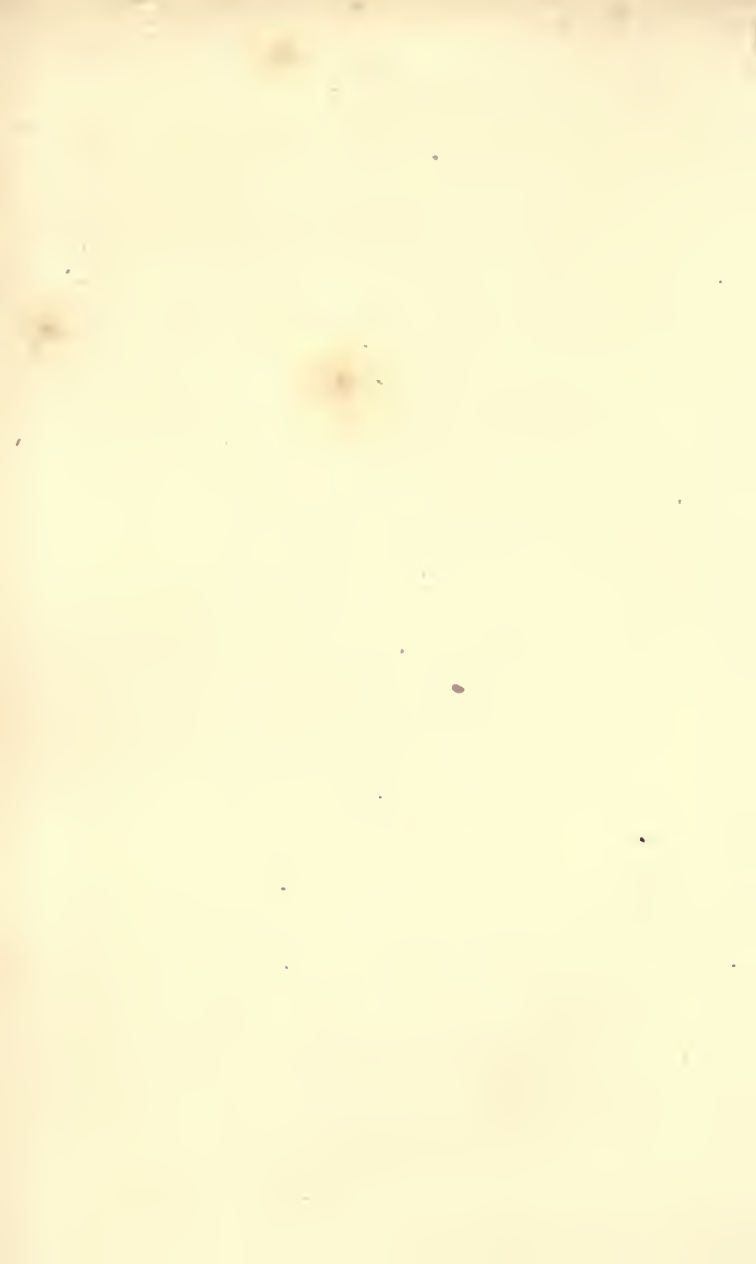
Thou wert my ruler : I resisted thee,
But blindly : O, come back ! — I will obey."

Within the breast of Lars the heart beat on,
Yet faintly, as a wheel more slowly turns
When summer drouth has made the streamlet thin.
They stanch'd the gushing life ; they raised him up,
And sense came back and cleared his clouded eye
At Brita's voice. He tried to stretch his hand :
"Where art thou, Brita ? It is time to choose :
Take what is left of him or me !" He paused :
She did not answer. Stronger came his voice :
"I think that I shall live : forget all this !
'T was not my doing, shall not be again,
If only thou wilt love me as I love."
"I love thee ?" Brita cried ; "who murderest him
I loved indeed ! Why should I wish thee life,
Except to show thee I can hate instead ?"

A groan so deep, so desperate and sad
Came from his throat, that men might envy him
Who lay so silent ; then they bore him forth,
While others smoothed the comely limbs of Per.
His mother, next, unrolled the decent shroud
She brought with her, as ancient custom bade,
To do him honor ; for man's death he died,
Not shameful straw-death of the sick and old.



BOOK II.



BOOK II.

LARS lived, because the life within his frame
Refused to leave it ; but his heart was dead,
He thought, for nothing moved him any more.
He spake not Brita's name, and every path
Where he had scattered fancies of the maid
Like seeds of flowers, but whence, instead, had grown
Malignant briars, to clog and tear his feet,
Was hated now : so, all that once seemed life,
So bright with power and purpose, rich in chance,
And dropping rest from every cloud of toil,
Became a weariness of empty days.

Thus, not to 'scape the blood-revenge for Per
Which Thorsten vowed, his brother : not to shun

The tongues and eyes of censure or reproach,
Or spoken pity, angering more than these ;
But, since each rock upon the lonely fell
Kept echoes of her voice, each cleft of blue
Where valleys wandered downward to the wave
Held shadows of her form, each meadow-sod
Her footprints, — all the land so filled with her,
Once hope, delight, but desolation now, —
Forth must he go, beyond his father's hearth,
Beyond the vales, beyond the teeth of snow,
The shores and skerries, till the world become
Too wide for knowledge of his evil fate,
Too strange for memory of his ruined love !

He recked not where ; but into passive moods
Some spirit drops a leaven, to point anew
Men's aimless forces. Was it only chance
That now recalled a long-forgotten tale ?

How Leif, his mother's grandsire, crossed the seas
To those new lands the great Gustavus claimed :
How, in The Key of old Calmår, their ship,
A trooper he, with Printz the Governor,
Sailed days and weeks ; the blue would never turn
To shallower green, and landsmen moped in dread,
Till shores grew up they scarce believed were such,
Low-lying, fresh, as if the hand of God
Had lately finished them. But farther on
The curving bay to one broad river led,
Where cabins nestled on the rising banks,
With mighty woods, and mellow intervalles,
Inviting corn and cattle. Then rejoiced
The Swedish farmers, and were set ashore ;
But on the level isle of Tinicum
Printz built a fort, and there the trooper, Leif,
Abode three years : and he was fain to tell,
When wounds and age had crippled him, how fair

LARS.

And fruitful was the land, how full of sun
And bountiful in streams, — and pity 't was
The strong Norse blood could not have stocked it all !

Lars knew not why these stories should return
To haunt his gloomy brain : but it was so,
And on the current of his memory launched
His thought, and followed ; then neglected will
Awoke, and on the track of thought embarked,
And soon his life was borne away from all
It knew, and burst the adamantine ring
Which bound its world within the greater world.
As one who, wandering by the water-side,
Steps in an empty boat, and sits him down,
Not knowing that his step has loosed the chain,
And drifts away, unwitting, on the tide,
So he was drifted : no farewell he spake,
But happy Ulvik and the fiord and fell

Passed from his eyes, and underneath his feet
The world went round, until he found himself,
Like one aroused from sleep, upon the hills
That roll, the heavings of the boundless blue.

As unto Leif, his mother's grandsire, so
To him it seemed the blue would never turn
To shallower green, till shining fisher-sails
Came, stars of land that rose before the land ;
Then fresher shores and climbing river-banks,
And broken woods and mellow intervalles,
With houses, corn, and cattle. There, perchance,
He dreamed, the memory of Leif might bide
Upon the level isle of Tinicum,
Or farms of Swedish settlers : if 't were so,
One stone was laid whereon to build a home.
But when the vessel at the city's wharf
Dropped anchor, and the bright new land was won,

The high red houses and the sober throngs
 Were strange to him, and strange the garb and speech.
 Awhile he lingered there ; until, outgrown
 The tongue's first blindness and the stranger's shame,
 His helpless craft was turned again to use.

Then sought he countrymen, and, finding now
 Within the Swedish Church at Weccacoe
 No Norse but in the features, else all changed,
 He left and wandered down the Delaware
 Unto the isle of Tinicum ; and there
 Of all that fortress of the valiant Printz
 Some yellow bricks remained. The name of Leif
 Who should remember ? Do we call to mind,
 Years afterward, the clover-head we plucked
 Some morn of June, and smelled, and threw away ?
 But when we find a life erased and lost
 Beneath the multitude's unsparing feet,—

LARS.

A life so clearly beating yet for us
In blood and memory, — comes a sad surprise :
So Lars went onward, losing hope of good,
To where, upon her hill, fair Wilmington
Looks to the river over marshy meads.
He saw the low brick church, with stunted tower,
The portal-arches, ivied now and old,
And passed the gate : lo ! there, the ancient stones
Bore Norland names and dear, familiar words !
It seemed the dead a comfort spake : he read,
Thrusting the nettles and the vines aside,
And softly wept : he knew not why he wept,
But here was something in the strange new land
That made a home, though growing out of graves.

Led by a faith that rest could not be far,
Beyond the town, where deeper vales bring down
The winding brooks from Pennsylvanian hills,

He walked : the ordered farms were fair to see,
And fair the peaceful houses : old repose
Mellowed the lavish newness of the land,
And sober toil gave everywhere the right
To simple pleasures. As by each he passed,
A spirit whispered : " No, not there ! " and then
His sceptic heart said : " Never anywhere ! "

The sun was low, when, with the valley's bend,
There came a change. Two willow-fountains flung
And showered their leafy streams before a house
Of rusty stone, with chimneys tall and white ;
A meadow stretched below ; and dappled cows,
Full-fed, were waiting for their evening call.
The garden lay upon a sunny knoll,
An orchard dark behind it, and the barn,
With wide, warm wings, a giant mother-bird,
Seemed brooding o'er its empty summer nest.

LARS.

Then Lars upon the roadside bank sat down,
For here was peace that almost seemed despair,
So near his eyes, so distant from his life
It lay : and while he mused, a woman came
Forth from the house, no servant-maid more plain
In her attire, yet, as she nearer drew,
Her still, sweet face, and pure, untroubled eyes
Spake gentle blood. A browner dove she seemed,
Without the shifting iris of the neck,
And when she spake her voice was like a dove's,
Soft, even-toned, and sinking in the heart.
Lars could not know that loss and yearning made
His eyes so pleading ; he but saw how hers
Bent on him as some serious angel's might
Upon a child, strayed in the wilderness.
She paused, and said : "Thou seemest weary,
friend,"
But he, instead of answer, clasped his hands.

The silent gesture wrought upon her mind :

She marked the alien face ; then, with a smile

That meant and made excuse for needful words,

She said : " Perhaps thou dost not understand ? "

" I understand," Lars answered ; " you are good.

Indeed, I 'm weary : not in hands and feet,

But tired of idly owning them. I see

A thousand fields where I could take my bread

Nor stint the harvest, and a thousand roofs

• That shelter corners where my head might rest,

Nor steal another's pillow ! "

As to seek

The meaning of his words, she mused a space.

In that still land of homes, how should she guess

What fancies haunt a homeless heart ? Yet his

Was surely need ; so, presently, she spake :

" Work only waits, I 've thought, for willing hands ;

A meal, and shelter for the night, we give

To all that ask ; what more is possible
 Rests with my father." Lars arose and went
 Beside her, where the cows came loitering on
 With udders swelled, and meadow-scented breath,
 Through opened bars and up the grassy lane.
 " Ho, Star ! " and " Pink ! " he called them coaxingly
 In soft Norse words : they stared as if they knew.
 " See, lady ! " then he cried : " the honest things
 Like him that likes them, over all the world."
 But " Nay," she said, " not ' lady ' ! — call me
 Ruth :

My father's name is Ezra Mendenhall,
 And hither comes he : I will speak for thee."

So Lars was sheltered, and when evening fell,
 And all, around the clean and peaceful board,
 Kept the brief silence which is fittest prayer
 Before the bread is broken, he was filled

With something calm which was akin to peace,
 With something restless, which was almost hope.
 The white-haired man with placid forehead sat
 And faced him, grave as any Bergen judge,
 Yet kindly ; he the stranger's claim allowed,
 And ample space for hunger, ere he spake :
 "What, then, might be thy name?" "My name is

Lars,

The son of Thorsten, in the Norway land.
 My father said the blood of heathen kings
 Runs in our veins, but we are Christian men,
 Who work the more because of idle sires,
 And speak the truth, and try to live good lives."

Lars ceased, as if a blow had closed his mouth,
 But Ezra said : "The name sounds heathenish,
 Indeed, yet hardly royal ; blood is naught to us,
 Yea, less than naught, or I, whose fathers served

The third man Edward, and his kindly wife,
 Philippa, loved the vanities of courts
 And cast away the birthright of their souls,
 Were now, perchance, a worldly popinjay,
 The Lord forgetting and provoking Him
 Me to forget. But this is needless talk :
 Thy hands declare that thou art bred to work ;
 Thy face, methinks, is truthful ; if thy life
 Be good, I know not. I can trust no more
 Than knowledge justifies, and charity
 Bids us assume until the knowledge comes."

"No more I ask," Lars answered ; "simple ways
 To me are home-ways : I can learn to serve,
 Because, when others served me, I was just."

"Our ways are strange to thee," said Ezra ; "thine
 Unsuitable, if here too long retained.

The just in spirit find in outward things
 A voice and testimony, which may not
 Be lightly changed : what sayest thou to this ? ”

“ To change in mine ? Why, truly, ’t were no
 change

To do thy bidding, yet to call thee friend ;
 To use the speech of brethren, as at home ;
 And, feigning not the faith that still may part,
 To bide in charity till knowledge comes, —
 So much, without a promise, I should give.”

“ Thou speakest fairly,” Ezra said ; “ to me
 Is need of labor less than faithful will,
 But this includes the other : if thou stand
 The easier test, the greater then may come.
 The man who feels his duty makes his own
 The beasts he tends or uses, and the fields,

Though all may be another's." "Then," said Ruth,

"My cows already must belong to Lars :

His speech was strange, and yet they understood."

So Lars remained. That night, beneath the roof,

His head lay light ; the very wind that breathed

Its low, perpetual wail among the boughs

Sufficed to cheer him, and the one dim star

That watched him from the highest heaven of

heavens

Made morning in his heart. Too soon passed off

The exalted mood, too soon his rich content

Was tarnished by the daily round of toil,

And all things grown familiar ; yet his pride,

That rose at censure for each petty fault

Of ignorance, supported while it stung.

And Ezra Mendenhall was just, and Ruth

Serenely patient, sweetly calm and kind :

LARS.

So, month by month, the even days were born
And died, the nights were drowned in deeper rest,
And fields and fences, streams and stately woods,
Fashioned themselves to suit his newer life,
Till ever fainter grew those other forms
Of fiord and fell, the high Hardanger range,
And Romsdal's teeth of snow. Yea, Brita's eyes
And Per's hot face he learned to hold away,
Save when they vexed his helpless soul in dreams.

The land was called Hockessin. O'er its hills,
High, wide, and fertile, blew a healthy air :
There was a homestead set wherever fell
A sunward slope, and breathed its crystal vein,
And up beyond the woods, at crossing roads,
The heart of all, the ancient meeting-house ;
And Lars went thither on an autumn morn.
Beside him went, it happened, Abner Cloud,

LARS.

A neighbor ; rigid in the sect, and rich,
And it was rumored that he crossed the hill
To Ezra's house, oftener than neighbor-wise.
This knew not Lars : but Abner's eye, he thought,
Fell not upon him as a friend's should fall,
And Abner's tongue perplexed him, for its tone
Was harsh or sneering when his words were fair.
He spake from every quarter, as a man
Who seeks a tender spot, or wound unhealed,
And probes the surface which he seems to soothe
Until some nerve betrays infirmity.
This, only, were the two alone : if Ruth
Came near, his face grew mild as curded milk,
And unctuous kindness overflowed his lips
Precise and thin, as who should godlier be ?
Perhaps he wooed, but 't was a wooing strange,
Lars fancied, or his heart were other stuff
Than those are made of which can bless or slay.

It was a silent meeting. Here the men
And there the women sat, the elder folk
Facing the younger from their rising seats,
With faces grave beneath the stiff, straight brim
Or dusky bonnet. They the stillness breathed
Like some high air wherein their souls were free,
And on their features, as on those that guard
The drifted portals of Egyptian fanes,
Sat mystery : the Spirit they obeyed
By voice or silence, as the influence fell,
Was near them, or their common seeking made
A spiritual Presence, mightier than the grasp
Of each, possessed in reverence by all.
But o'er the soul of Lars there lay the shade
Of his own strangeness : peace came not to him.
Awhile he idly watched the flies that crawled
Along the hard, bare pine, or marked, in front,
The close-cut hair and flaring lobes of ears,

Until his mind turned on itself, and made
A wizard twilight, where the shapes of life
Shone forth and faded : subtler sense awoke,
But dream-like first, and then the form of Per
Became a living presence which abode ;
And all the pain and trouble of the past
Threatened like something evil yet to come.
At last, that phantasm of his memory sat
Beside him, and would not be banished thence
By will or prayer : he lifted up his face,
And met the cold gray eyes of Abner Cloud.

The man, thenceforward, seemed an enemy,
And Ruth, he scarce knew why, but all her ways
So cheered and soothed, a power to subjugate
The devil in his heart. But now the leaves
Flashed into glittering jewels ere they fell ;
The pastures lessened, and, when day was done,

Came quiet evenings, bare of tale and song,
 Such as beneath Norwegian rafters shook
 Tired lids awake ; and wearisome to Lars,
 Till Ruth, who noted, fetched the useless books
 Of school-girl days, and portioned him his task,
 Herself the teacher. Oft would Ezra smile
 To note her careful and unyielding sway.

“Nay, now,” he said ; “I thought our speech was
 plain,

But thou dost hedge each common phrase with thorns,
 Like something rare : dost thou not make it hard ?”

“A right foundation, father,” she replied,

“Makes easy building : thus it is in life.

I teach thee, Lars, no other than the Lord
 Requires of all, through discipline that makes
 His goodness hard until it lives in us.”

With paler cheeks Lars turned him to his task,
 Thus innocently smitten ; but his mind

LARS.

Increased in knowledge, till the alien tongue
Obeyed the summons of his thought. So toil
Brought freedom, and the winter passed away.

Where Lars was blind, the eyes of Abner Cloud
Saw more than was. This school-boy giant drew,
He fancied, like a rank and chance-sown weed
Beside some wholesome plant, the strength away
From his desire, of old and rightful root.
'T was not that Ruth should love the stranger, — no !
But woman's interest is lightly caught,
So hers by Lars, that might have turned to him.
Had he not worldly goods, and honest name,
And birthright in the meeting ? Who could weigh
Unknown with these deserts ? — but gentleness
Is blind, and goodness ignorant ; so he,
By malice made sagacious, learned to note
The large, strong veins that filled and rose, although

The tongue was still, the clench of powerful hands,
 The trouble hiding in the gloomy eye,
 And wrought on these by cunning words. But most
 He played with forms of Scandinavian faith
 In that old time before King Olaf came,
 And made their huge, divine barbarities,
 Their strength and slaughter, fields of frost and blood,
 More hideous. "These are fables, thou wilt claim,"
 It was his wont to say; "but such must nurse
 A people false and cruel."

Then would Lars
 Reply with heat: "Not so! but honest folk, instead,
 Too frank to hide the face of any fault,
 And free from all the evil crafts that breed
 In hearts of cowards!"

Ruth, it rarely chanced,
 Heard aught of this, but when she heard, her voice
 Came firm and clear: "Indeed, it is not good

To drag those times forth from their harmless graves.
Their ignorance and wicked strength are dead,
And what of good they knew was not their own,
But ours as well : this is our sole concern,
To feed the life of goodness in ourselves
And all, that so the world at last escape
The darkness of our fathers far away."

As when some malady within the frame
Is planted, slowly tainting all the blood,
And underneath the seeming healthy skin
In secret grows till strong enough to smite
With rank disorder, so the strife increased ;
And Lars perceived the devil of his guilt
Had made a darkness, where he ambushed lay
And waited for his time. Against him rose
The better knowledge, breeding downy wings
Of prayer, yet shaken by mistrust and hate

LARS.

At touch of Abner's malice. Thus the hour,
The inevitable, came.

A Sabbath morn

Of early spring lay lovely on the land.
Upon the bridge that to the barn's broad floor
Led from the field, stood Lars : his eyes were fixed
Upon his knife, and, as he turned the blade
This way and that, and with it turned his thought,
While musing if 't were best to cover up
This witness, or to master what it told,
Close to the haft he marked a splash of rust,
And shuddered as he held it nearer. "Blood,
And doubtless human !" spake a wiry voice,
And Abner Cloud bent down his head to look.
A sound of waters filled the ears of Lars
And all his flesh grew chill : he said no word.
"I have thy history, now," thought Abner Cloud,
And in the pallid silence read but fear ;

So thus aloud : " Thou art a man of crime,
The proper offspring of the godless tribes
Who drank from skulls, and gnawed the very bones
Of them they slew. This is thine instrument,
And thou art hungering for its bloody use.
Say, hast thou ever eaten human flesh ? "

Then all the landscape, house, and trees, and hills,
Before the eyes of Lars, burned suddenly
In crimson fire : the roaring of his ears
Became a thunder, and his throat was brass.
Yet one wild pang of deadly fear of self
Shot through his heart, and with a mighty cry
Of mingled rage, resistance, and appeal,
He flung his arms towards heaven, and hurled afar
The fatal knife. This saw not Abner Cloud :
But death he saw within those dreadful eyes,
And turned and fled. Behind him bounded Lars,

LARS.

The man cast off, the wild beast only left,
The primal savage, who is born anew
In every child. Not long had been the race,
But Ezra Mendenhall, approaching, saw
The danger, swiftly thrust himself between,
And Lars, whose passion-blinded eyes beheld
An obstacle, that only, struck him down.
Then deadly hands he dashed at Abner's throat,
But they were grasped : he heard the cry of Ruth,
Not what she said : he heard her voice, and stood.

She knew not what she said : she only saw
The wide and glaring eyes suffused with blood,
The stiff-drawn lips that, parting, showed the teeth,
And on the temples every standing vein
That throbbed, dumb voices of destroying wrath.
The soul that filled her told her what to do :
She dropped his hands and softly laid her own

LARS.

Upon his brow, then looked the devil down
Within his eyes, till Lars was there again.
Erelong he trembled, while, o'er all his frame
A sweat of struggle and of agony
Brake forth, and from his throat a husky sob.
He tried to speak, but the dry tongue refused ;
He could but groan, and staggered towards the
house,
As walks a man who neither hears nor sees.

With bloodless lips of fear gasped Abner Cloud :
“ A murderer ! ” as Ezra Mendenhall
Came, stunned, and with a wound across his brow.
“ O, never ! ” Ruth exclaimed ; but she was pale.
She bound her father's head ; she gave him drink ;
She steadied him with arms of gentle strength,
Then spake to Abner : “ Now, I pray thee, go ! ”
No more : but such was her authority

LARS.

Of speech and glance, the spirit and the power,
That he obeyed, and turned, and left the place.

Then Ezra's strength came back ; and "Ruth," he said,
"I see thou hast a purpose : let me know !"

"I only feel," she answered, "that a soul
Is here in peril, but the way to help
Is not made plain : the knowledge will be given."

"I have no fear for thee, my daughter : do
What seemeth good, and strongly brought upon
Thy mind by plain direction of the Lord !
There is a power of evil in the man
That might be purged, if once he saw the light."

She left him, seated in the sunny porch :
Within the house and orchard all was still,
Nor found she Lars, at first. But she was driven
By that vague purpose which was void of form,

And climbed, at last, to where his chamber lay,
Beneath the rafters. On the topmost step
He sat, his forehead bent upon his knees,
A bundle at his side, as when he came.
He raised his head : Ruth saw his eyes were dull,
His features cold and haggard, and his voice,
When thus he spake to her, was hoarse and strange :
“Thou need’st not tell me : I already know.
I hope thou thinkest it is hard to me.
I am a man of violence and blood,
Not meet for thy pure company ; and now
When unto peaceful ways my heart inclined,
And thou hadst shown the loveliness of good,
My guilt, not yet atoned, brings other guilt
To drive me forth : and this disgrace is worst.”

Ruth stood below him where he sat : she laid
One hand upon the hand upon his knee,

And spake : " I judge thee not ; I cannot know
 What grievous loss or strong temptation wrought ;
 But if, indeed, to good and peaceful ways
 Thy heart inclines, canst thou not wrestle with
 The Adversary ? This knowledge of thy guilt
 Is half-repentance : whole would make thee sound."
 " And then — and then " — his natural voice returned ;
 " Then — pardon ? " " Pardon, now, from me and him,
 My father, — for I know his perfect heart, —
 Thou hast ; but couldst thou turn thy dreadful strength
 That so it lift, and change, and chasten thee ? "
 " If I but could ! " — he cried, and bowed again
 His forehead. " Wait ! " she whispered, left him there,
 And sought her father.

Now, when Ezra heard

All this repeated, for a space he sat
 In earnest meditation. " Bid him come ! "
 He said, at last, and Ruth brought Lars to him.

Upon the doubting and the suffering face
The old man gazed ; then " Put thy bundle by ! "
Came from his lips ; " thou shalt not leave, to-day.
Thy hands have done me hurt ; if thou art just,
One service do thyself, in following me.
Come with us to the meeting : there the Lord
Down through the silence of fraternal souls
May reach His hand. We cannot guess His ways ;
Only so much the inward Voice declares."

But little else was said : upon them lay
The shadow of an unknown past, the weight
Of present trouble, the uncertainty
Of what should come ; yet o'er the soul of Ruth
Hung something happier than she dared to feel,
And Lars, in silence, with submissive feet.
Followed, as one who in a land of mist
Feels one side warmer, where the sun must be.

Then, parted ere they reached the separate doors,
Lars went with Ezra : Abner Cloud, within,
Beheld them enter, and he marvelled much
Such things could be. Straightway the highest seat
Took Ezra, where the low partition-boards
Sundered the men and women. There alone
Sat they whom most the Spirit visited,
And spake through them, and gave authority.

Then silence fell ; how long, Lars could not know,
Nor Ruth, for each was in a trance of soul,
Till Ezra rose. His words, at first, were few
And broken, and they trembled on his lips ;
But soon the power and full conviction came,
And then, as with Ezekiel's trumpet-voice
He spake : " Lo ! many vessels hath the Lord
Set by the fount of Evil in our hearts.
Here envy and false-witness catch the green,

There pride the purple, lust the ruddy stream :
 But into anger runs the natural blood,
 And flows the faster as 't is tapped the more.
 Here lies the source : the conquest here begins,
 Then meekness comes, good-will, and purity.
 Let whoso weigh, when his offence is sore,
 The Lord's offences, and his patience mete,
 Though myriads less in measure, by the Lord's !
 This yoke is easy, if in love ye bear.
 For none, the lowest, rather hates than loves ;
 But Love is shy, and Hate delights to show
 A brazen forehead ; 't is the noblest sign
 Of courage, and the rarest, to reveal
 The tender evidence of brotherhood.
 With one this sin is born, with other, that ;
 Who shall compare them ? — either sin is dark,
 But one redeeming Light is over both.
 The Evil that assails resist not ye

With equal evil ! — else ye change to man
 The Lord within, whom ye should glorify
 By words that prove Him, deeds that bless like Him !
 What spake the patient and the holy Christ ?
 Unto thy brother first be reconciled,
 Then bring thy gift ! and further : Bless ye them
 That curse you, and do good to them that hate
 And persecute, that so the children ye may be
 Of Him, the Father. Yea, His perfect love
 Renewed in us, and of our struggles born,
 Gives, even on earth, His pure, abiding peace.
 Behold, these words I speak are nothing new,
 But they are burned with fire upon my mind
 To help — the Lord permit that they may save ! ”

Therewith he laid his hat aside, and all
 Beheld the purple welt across his brow,
 And marvelled. Thus he prayed : “ Our God and Lord

And Father, unto whom our secret sins
 Lie bare and scarlet, turn aside from them
 In holy pity, search the tangled heart
 And breathe Thy life upon its seeds of good !
 Thou leavest no one wholly dark : Thou giv'st
 The hope and yearning where the will is weak,
 And unto all the blessed strength of love.
 So give to him, and even withhold from me
 Thy gifts designed, that he receive the more :
 Give love that pardons, prayer that purifies,
 And saintly courage that can suffer wrong,
 For these beget Thy peace, and keep Thee near !”

He ceased : all hearts were stirred ; and suddenly
 Amid the younger members Lars arose,
 Unconscious of the tears upon his face,
 And scarcely audible : “ O, brethren here,
 He prayed for my sake, for my sake pray ye !

I am a sinful man : I do repent.

I see the truth, but in my heart the lamp

Is barely lighted, any wind may quench.

Bear with me still, be helpful, that I live ! ”

Then all not so much wondered but they felt

The man's most earnest need ; and many a voice

Responsive murmured : “ Yea, I will ! ” and some,

Whose brows were tombstones over passions slain,

When meeting broke came up and took his hand.

The three walked home in silence, but to Lars

The mist had lifted, and around him fell

A bath of light ; and dimly spread before

His feet the sweetness of a purer world.

When Ezra, that diviner virtue spent

Which held him up, grew faint upon the road,

The arm of Lars became a strength to him ;

Yet all he said, before the evening fell,

Was : "Gird thy loins, my friend, the way is long
And wearisome : haste not, but never rest !"

"I will not close mine eyes," said Lars to Ruth,
And laid aside the book, *No Cross, No Crown*,
She gave him as a comfort and a help ;
"Till thou hast heard the tale I have to tell.
Thou speakest truth, the knowledge of my sin
Is half-repentance, yet the knowledge burns
Like fire in ashes till it be confessed.
Revoke thy pardon, if it must be so,
When all is told : yea, speak to me no more,
But I must speak !" So he began, and spared
No circumstance of love, and hate, and crime,
The songs and dances which the Friends forbid,
The bloody customs and the cries profane,
Till all lay bare and horrible. And Ruth
Grew pale and flushed by turns, and often wept,

And, when he ceased, was silent. "Now, farewell !"

He would have said, when she looked up and spake :

"Thy words have shaken me : we read such tales,
Nor comprehend, so distant and obscure :
Thou makest manifest the living truth.
Save thee, I never knew a man of blood :
Thou shouldst be wicked, and my heart declares
Thy gentleness : ah, feeling all thy sin,
Can I condemn thee, nor myself condemn ?
Thy burden, thus, is laid upon me. Pray
For power and patience, pray for victory !
Then falls the burden, and my soul is glad."

Lars saw what he had done. His limbs unstrung
Gave way, and softly on his knees he sank,
And all the passion of his nature bore

His yearning upward, till in faith it died.
He rose at last ; his face was calm and strong :
Ruth smiled, and then they parted for the night.

Yet Ezra's words were true : the way was long
And wearisome. The better will was there,
But not the trust in self ; for, still beside
Those pleasant regions opening on his soul,
Beat the unyielding blood, as beats afar
The vein of lightning in a summer cloud.
And, as in each severe community
Of interests circumscribed, where all is known,
And roughly handled till opinions join,
So, here, were those who kindly turned to Lars,
And those who doubted, or declared him false.
In this probation, Ruth became his stay :
She knew and turned not, knew and yet believed
As did no other, — hoping more than he.

Meanwhile the summer and the harvest came.

One afternoon, within the orchard, Ruth

Gathered the first sweet apples of the year,

That give such pleasure by their painted cheeks

And healthy odor. Little breezes shook

The interwoven flecks of sun and shade,

O'er all the tufted carpet of the grass ;

The birds sang near her, and beyond the hedge,

Where stretched the oat-field broad along the hill,

Were harvest voices, broken wafts of sound,

That brought no words. Then something made her

start ;

She gazed and waited : o'er the thorny wall

Lars leaped, or seemed to fly, and ran to her,

His features troubled and his hands outstretched.

"O Ruth !" he cried ; "I pray thee, take my hands !

This power I have, at last : I can refrain

Till help be sought, the help that dwells in thee."

She took his hands, and soon, in kissing palms,
 His violent pulses learned the beat of hers.
 Sweet warmth o'erspread his frame ; he saw her face,
 And how the cheeks flushed and the eyelids fell
 Beneath his gaze, and all at once the truth
 Beat fast and eager in the palms of both.
 "Take not away," he cried ; "now, nevermore,
 Thy hands ! O Ruth, my saving angel, give
 Thyself to me, and let our lives be one !
 I cannot spare thee : heart and soul alike
 Have need of thee, and seem to cry aloud :
 'Lo ! faith and love and holiness are one !'"
 But who shall paint the beauty of her eyes
 When they unveiled, and softly clung to his,
 The while she spake : "I think I loved thee first
 When first I saw thee, and I give my life,
 In perfect trust and faith, to these thy hands."
 "The fight is fought," said Lars ; "so blest by thee,

LARS.

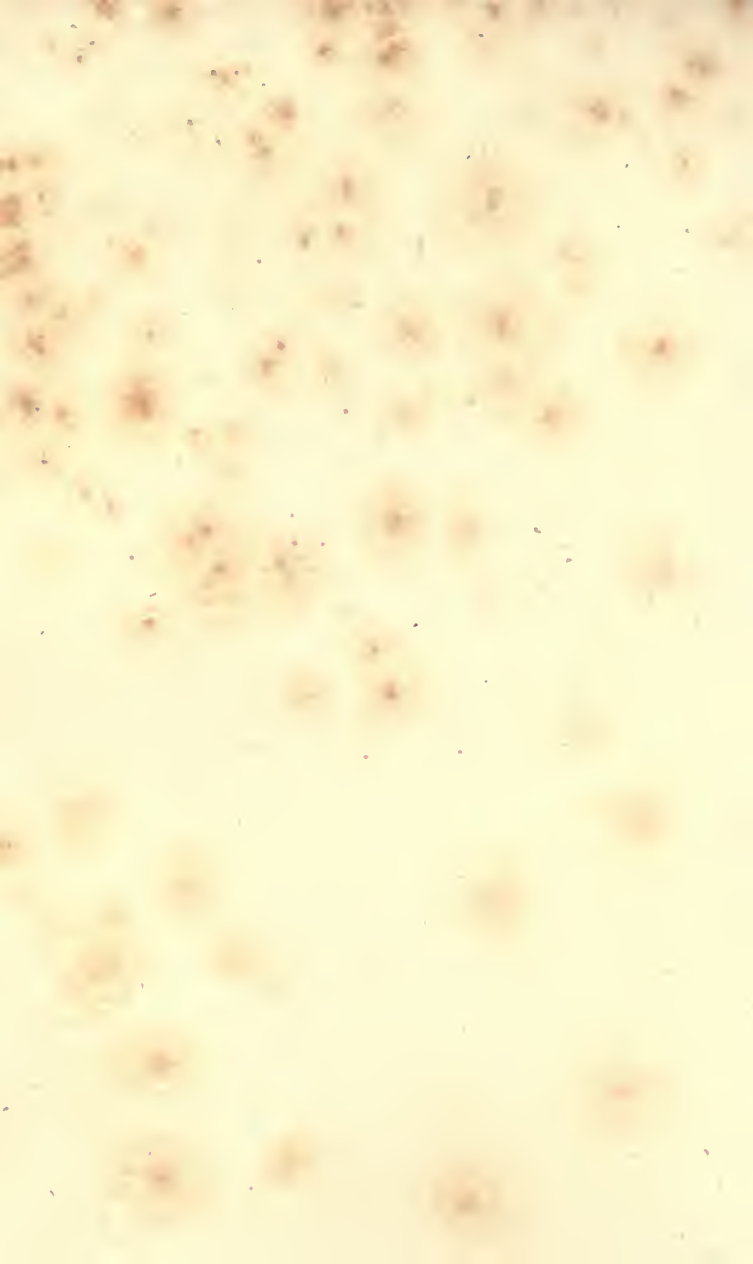
The strength of darkness and temptation dies.
If now the light must reach me through thy soul,
It is not clouded : clearer were too keen,
Too awful in its purity, for man."

So into joy revolved the doubtful year,
And, ere it closed, the gentle fold of Friends
Sheltered another member, even Lars.
The evidence of faith, in words and ways,
Could none reject, and thus opinions joined,
And that grew natural which was marvel first.
Then followed soon, since Ezra willed it so,
Seeing that twofold duty guided Ruth,
The second marvel, bitterness to one
Who blamed his haste, nor felt how free is fate,
Whose sweeter name is love, of will or plan.
And all the country-side assembled there,
One winter Sabbath, when in snow and sky

The colors of transfiguration shone,
Within the meeting-house. There Ruth and Lars
Together sat upon the women's side,
And when the peace was perfect, they arose.
He took her by the hand, and spake these words,
As ordered : " In the presence of the Lord
And this assembly, by the hand I take
Ruth Mendenhall, and promise unto her,
Divine assistance blessing me, to be
A loving and a faithful husband, even
Till Death shall separate us." Then spake Ruth
The same sweet words ; and so the twain were one.



BOOK III.



BOOK III.

Love's history, as Life's, is ended not
By marriage: though the ignorant Paradise
May then be lost, the world of knowledge waits,
With ample opportunities, to mould
Young Eve and Adam into wife and man.
Some grace of sentiment expires, yet here
The nobler poetry of life begins:
The squire is knight, the novice takes the vow,
Old service falls, new powers and duties join,
And that high Beauty, which is crown of all,
No more a lightsome maid, with tresses free
And mantle floating from the bosom bare,
Confronts us now like holy Barbara,

As Palma drew, or she, Our Lady, born
On Milos, type of perfect growth and pure.

So Lars and Ruth beside each other learned
What neither, left unwedded, could have won :
He how reliant and how fond the heart
Whose love seemed almost pity, she how firm
And masterful the nature, which appealed
There for support where hers had felt no strain ;
And both, how solemn, sweet, and wonderful
The life of man. Their life, indeed, was still,
Too still for aught save blessing, for a time.
All things were ordered : plenty in the house
And fruitfulness of field and meadow made
Light labor, and the people came and went,
According to their old and friendly ways.
Within the meeting-house upon the hill
Now Ezra oftener spake, and sometimes Lars,

Fain to obey the spirit which impelled ;
 And what of custom'd phrase they missed, or tone,
 Unlike their measured chant, did he supply
 With words that bore a message to the heart.

All this might seem sufficient ; yet to Ruth
 Was still unrest, where, unto shallow eyes
 Dwelt peace : she felt the uneasy soul of Lars,
 And waited, till his own good time should come.

Yea, verily, he was happy : could she doubt
 The signs in him that spake the same in her ?

Yea, he was happy : every day proclaimed
 The freshness of a blessing rebestowed,
 The conscious gift, unworn by time or use,
 And this was sweet to see ; yet he betrayed

That wavering will, the opposite of faith,
Which comes of duty known and not performed.

It seemed his lines of life were cast in peace,

LARS.

In green Hockessin, where Lars Thorstensen,
A sound that echoed of Norwegian shores,
Became Friend Thurston : all things there conspired
To blot the Past, but in his soul it lived.

Then, as his thoughts went back, his tongue re-
vealed :

He spake of winding fiord and windy fell,
Of Ulvik's cottages and Graven's lake,
And all the moving features of a life
So strange to Ruth ; till she made bold to break,
Through playful chiding, what was grave surmise :
" I fear me, Lars, that thou art sick for home.
Thy love is with me and thy memory far :
Thou seest with half thy sight ; and in thy dreams
I hear thee murmur in thine other tongue,
So soft and strange, so good, I cannot doubt,
If I but knew it ; but thy dreams are safe."

LARS.

“Nay, wife,” he said ; “misunderstand them not !
For dreams hold up before the soul, released
From worldly business, pictures of itself,
And in confused and mystic parables
Foreshadow what it seeks. I do confess
I love Old Norway’s bleak, tremendous hills,
Where winter sits, and sees the summer burn
In valleys deeper than yon cloud is high :
I love the ocean-arms that gleam and foam
So far within the bosom of the land :
It is not that. I do confess to thee
I love the frank, brave habit of the folk,
The hearts unspoiled, though fed from ruder times
And filled with angry blood : I love the tales
That taught, the ancient songs that cradled me,
The tongue my mother spake, unto the Lord
As sweet as thine upon the lips of prayer :
It is not that.”

Then he perused her face
Full earnestly, and drew a deeper breath.
“My wife, my Ruth,” his words came, low yet firm ;
“Thou knowest of one who brake-a precious box
Of ointment, and refreshed the weary feet
Of Him who pardoned her. But, had He given
Not pardon only, had He stretched His arm
And plucked, as from the vine of Paradise,
All blessing and all bounty and all good,
What then were she that idly took and used ?”

“I read thy meaning,” answered Ruth ; “speak on !”

“Am I not he that idly uses ? Are there not
Here many reapers, there a wasting field ?
In them the fierce inheritance of blood
I overcame, is mighty still to slay ;
For ancient custom is a ring of steel

They know not how to snap. By day and night
A powerful spirit calls me : 'Go to them !'
What should mine answer to the spirit be ?"

If there were aught of struggle in her heart,
She hid the signs. A little pale her cheek,
But with untrembling eyelids she upraised
Her face to his, and took him by the hands :
"Thy Lord is mine : what should I say to thee,
Except what she, whose name I bear, ere yet
She went to glean in Bethlehem's harvest-field,
Said to Naomi : 'Nay, entreat me not
To leave thee, or return from following thee' ?
Should not thy people, then, be mine, as mine
Are made thine own ? I will not fail : He calls
On both of us who gives thee this command."

So Ruth, erelong, detached her coming life

From all its past, until each well-known thing
 No more was sure or needful, to her mind.
 Her neighbors, even, seemed to come and go
 Like half-existences ; her days, as well,
 Were clad with dream ; she understood the words,
 "I but sojourn among you for a time,"
 And, from the duties which were habits, turned
 To brood o'er those unknown, awaiting her.

But Ezra, when he heard their purpose, spake :
 "Because this thing is very hard to me,
 I dare not preach against it ; but I doubt,
 Being acquainted with the heart of man.

{ 'T is one thing, Lars, to build thy virtue here,
 Where others urge the better will : but there,
 Alone, persuaded, ridiculed, assailed,
 Couldst thou resist, yet love them ? Nay, I know
 Thy power and conscience : Try them not too soon !

LARS.

Is all I ask. See, I am full of years,
And thou, my daughter, thou, indeed a son,
Stay me on either side : wait but awhile
And ye are free, yea, seasoned as twin beams
Of soundest oak, for lintels of His door."

They patiently obeyed. The years went by,
Until five winters blanched to perfect snow
The old man's hair. Then, when the gusts of March
Shook into life the torpid souls of trees,
His body craved its rest. He summoned Lars,
And meekly said : "I pray thee, pardon me
That I have lived so long : I meant it not.
Now I am certain that the end is near ;
And, noting as I must, the deep concern
On both your minds, I fain would aid that work,
The which, I see, ye mean to undertake."
Then counsel wise he gave : it seemed his mind,

LARS.

Those five long years, had pondered all things well,
Computed every chance and sought the best,
Foresaw and weighed, foreboded and prepared,
Until the call was made his legacy.

At last he said : " My sight is verily clear,
And I behold your duty as yourselves " ;
Then spake farewell with pleasant voice, and died.

When summer came, upon an English ship
Sailed Lars and Ruth between the rich green shores
That widened, sinking, till the land was drowned,
And they were blown on rolling fields of blue.
Blown backward more than on ; and evil eyes
Of sailors on their sober Quaker garb
Began to turn. " Our Jonah ! " was the cry,
When Lars was seen upon the quarter-deck,
And one, a ruffian from the Dorset moors,
Became so impudent and foul of tongue

That Ruth was frightened, would have fled below,
But Lars prevented her. Three strides he made,
Then by the waistband and the neck he seized
That brutish boor, and o'er the bulwarks held,
Above the brine, like death for very fear.

"Now, promise me to keep a decent tongue!"
Cried Lars; and he: "I promise anything,
But let me not be lost!" Thenceforth respect
Those sailors showed to strength, though clad in
peace.

"Now see I wherefore thou wert made so strong,"
Ruth said to him, and inwardly rejoiced;
And soon the mists and baffling breezes fled
Before a wind that down from Labrador
Blew like a will unwearied, night and day,
Across the desert of the middle sea.
Out of the waters rose the Scilly Isles,
Afar and low, and then the Cornish hills,

And, floating up by many a valley-mouth
Of Devon streams, they came to Bristol town.

Awhile among their brethren they abode,
For thus had Ezra ordered. There were some
Concerned in trade, whose vessels to and fro
From Hull across the German Ocean sailed,
And touched Norwegian ports ; and Lars in those,
The old man said, must find his nearest stay.
But soon it chanced that with a vessel came
A man of Arendal, in Norway land,
Known to the Friends as fair in word and deed,
And well-inclined ; and Gustaf Hansen named.
Norse tongue makes easy friendship: Lars and
he
Became as brothers in a little while,
And, when his worldly charge was ordered, they
Together all embarked for Arendal.

Calm autumn skies were o'er them, and the sea
Swelled in unwrinkled glass : they scarcely knew
How sped the voyage, until Lindesnaes,
At first a cloud, stood fast, and spread away
To flanking capes, with gaps of blue between ;
Then rose, and showed, above the precipice,
The firs of Norway climbing thick and high
To wilder crests that made the inland gloom.
In front, the sprinkled skerries pierced the wave ;
Between them, slowly glided in and out
The tawny sails, while houses low and red
Hailed their return, or sent them fearless forth.
" This is thy Norway, Lars ; it like looks thee " ;
Said Ruth : " it has a forehead firm and bold ;
It sets its foot below the reach of storms,
Yet hides, methinks, in each retiring vale,
Delight in toil, contentment, love, and peace,—
My land, my husband ! let me love it, too ! "

So on their softened hearts the sun went down
And rose once more ; then Gustaf Hansen came
Beside them, pilot of familiar shores,
And said : " To starboard, yonder, lies the isle
As I described it ; here, upon our lee
Is mainland all, and there the Nid comes down,
The timber-shouldering Nid, from endless woods
And wilder valleys where scant grain is grown.
Now bend your glances as my finger points, —
Lo ! there it is, the spire of Arendal !
Our little town, as homely, kind, and dear,
As some old dame, round whom her children's babes
Cling to be petted, comforted, and spoiled.
And here, my friends, shall ye with me abide
And with my Thora, till the winter melts,
Which there, behind yon wall of slaty cloud,
Possesses fell and upland even now.
Too strange is Ruth to dare those snowy wastes,

Nor is there need : good Thora's heart will turn
To her, I know, as mine hath turned to Lars ;
And Arendal is warmly-harbored, snug,
And not unfriendly in the time of storms."

They could not say him nay. The anchor dropped
Before the town, and Thora, from the land,
Tall, broad of breast, with ever-rosy cheeks
O'er which the breezes tossed her locks of gray,
Stretched arms of welcome ; and the ancient house,
With massive beams and ample chimney-place,
As in Hockessin, made immediate home.
To Ruth, how sweetly the geraniums peeped
With scarlet eyes across the window-sill !
How orderly the snowy curtains shone !
Familiar, too, the plainness and the use
In all things ; presses of the dusky oak,
Fair linen, store of healing herbs that smelled

Of charity, and signs of forethought wise
That justified the plenty of the house.
It was as Gustaf said : good Thora loved
The foreign woman, taught and counselled her,
Taking to heart their purpose, so that she
Unconsciously received the truth of Friends.
And Gustaf also, through the soul of Lars,
To him laid bare, and all that blessing clear
Obedience brings when speaks the inward voice,
Believed erelong ; then others come to hear,
Till there, in Arendal, a brotherhood
Of earnest seekers for the light grew up,
Before the hasty spring of northern lands
Sowed buttercups along the banks of Nid.

But when they burst, those precious common flowers
That not a meadow of the world can spare,
Said Lars, one Sabbath, to the little flock :

“ Here we have tarried long, and it is well ;
But now we go, and it is also well.
This much is blessing added unto those
That went before ; hence louder rings the call
Which brought me hither, and I must obey.
My path is clear, my duty strange and stern,
The end thereof uncertain ; it may be,
My brethren, I shall never see ye more.
Your love upholds me, and your faith confirms
My purpose : bless me now, and bid farewell ! ”
Then Gustaf wept, and said : “ Our brother, go !
Yet thou art with us, and we walk with thee
In this or yonder world, as bids the Lord.”

Their needful preparations soon were made :
Two strong dun horses of the mountain breed,
With hoofs like claws, that clung where'er they touched,
Unholstered saddles, leathern wallets filled

With scrip for houseless ways, close-woven cloaks
To comfort them upon the cloudy fells,
And precious books, by Penn and Barclay writ
And Woolman, — these made up their little store.
The few and faithful went with them a space
Along the banks of Nid ; there first besought
All power and light, and furtherance for the task
Awaiting Lars : they knew not what it was,
But what it was, they knew, was good : then all
Gave hands and said farewell, and Lars and Ruth
Rode boldly onward, facing the dark land.

Across the lonely hills of Tellemark,
That smiled in sunshine, went their earnest way,
And by the sparkling waters of the Tind ;
Then, leaving on the left that chasm of dread
Where, under Gousta's base, the Rinkan falls
In winnowing blossoms, tendrilled vines of foam,

And bursting rockets of the starry spray,
They rode through forests into Hemsedal.
The people marvelled at their strange attire,
But all were kind ; and Ruth, to whom their speech
Was now familiar, found such ordered toil,
Such easy gladness, temperate desire,
That many doubts were laid : the spirit slept,
She thought, and waited but a heartsome call.
Then ever higher stood the stormy fells
Against uncertain skies, as they advanced ;
And ever grander plunged the roaring snow
Of mighty waterfalls from cliff to vale :
The firs were mantled in a blacker shade,
The rocks were rusted as with ancient blood,
And winds that shouted or in wailing died
Harried the upper fields, in endless wrath
At finding there no man.

The soul of Lars

Expanded with a solemn joy ; but Ruth,
 Awed by the gloom and wildness of the land,
 Rode close, and often touched her husband's arm ;
 And when within its hollow dell they saw
 The church of Borgund like a dragon sit,
 Its roof all horns, its pitchy shingles laid
 Like serpent scales, its door a dusky throat,
 She whispered : " This the ancients must have left
 From their abolished worship : is it so ?
 This is no temple of the living Lord,
 That makes me fear it like an evil thing ! "
 " Consider not its outward form," said Lars,
 " Or mine may vex thee, for my sin outgrown.
 I would the dragon in the people's blood
 As harmless were ! " So downward, side by side,
 From ridges of the windy Fille Fell
 Unto the borders of the tamer brine,
 The sea-arm bathing Frithiof's home, they rode ;

LARS.

Then two days floated past those granite walls
That mock the boatman with a softer song,
And took the land again, where shadow broods,
And frequent thunder of the tumbling rocks
Is heard the summer through, in Nærödal.
To Ruth the gorge seemed awful, and the path
That from its bowels toiled to meet the sun,
Was hard as any made for Christian's feet,
In Bunyan's dream ; but Lars with lighter step
The giddy zigzag scaled, for now, beyond,
Not distant, lay the Vossevangen vale,
And all the cheerful neighborhood of home.

At last, one quiet afternoon, they crossed
The fell from Graven, and below them saw
The roofs of Ulvik and the orchard-trees
Shining in richer colors, and the fiord,
A dim blue gloom between Hardanger heights,—

The strife and peace, the plenty and the need ;
And both were silent for a little space.

Then Ruth : " I had not thought thy home so fair,
Nor yet so stern and overhung with dread.

It seems to draw me as a danger draws,

Yet gives me courage : is it well with thee ? "

" That which I would, I know," responded Lars,

" Not that which may be : ask no more, I pray ! "

Then downward, weary, strangely moved, yet glad,

They went, a wonder to the Ulvik folk,

Till some detected, 'neath his shadowy brim,

The eyes of Lars ; and he was scarcely housed

With his astonished kindred, ere the news

Spread from the fountain, ran along the shore.

For all believed him dead : in truth, the dead

Could not have risen in stranger guise than he,

Who spake as one they knew and did not know,

Who seemed another, yet must be the same.

His folk were kind : they owned the right of blood;
Nor would disgrace it, though a half-disgrace
Lars seemed to bring ; but in her strange, sweet self
Ruth brought a pleasure which ere long was love.
Her gentle voice, her patient, winning ways,
Pure thought and ignorance of evil things
That on her wedlock left a virgin bloom,
Set her above them, yet her nature dwelt
In lowliness : sister and saint she seemed.

Soon Thorsten, brother of the slaughtered Per,
Alike a stalwart fisher of the fiord,
Heard who had come, and published unto all
The debt of blood he meant to claim of Lars.
“ The coward, only, comes as man of peace,
To shirk such payment ! ” were his bitter words.
And they were carried unto Lars : but he
Spoke firmly : “ Well I knew what he would claim :

The coward, knowing, comes not." Nothing more ;
 Nor could they guess the purpose of his mind.
 In little Ulvik all the people learned
 What words had passed, and there were friends of both ;
 But Lars kept silent, walked the ways unarmed,
 And preached the pardon of an utmost wrong.
 Now Thorsten saw in this but some device
 To try his own forbearance : his revenge
 Grew hungry for an answering enmity,
 And weary of its shame ; and so, at last,
 He sent this message : "If Lars Thorstensen
 Deny not blood he spilled, and guilt thereof,
 Then let him meet me by the Graven lake," —
 On such a day.

When came the message, Lars
 Spake thus to all his kindred : "I will go :
 I do deny not my blood-guiltiness.
 This thing hath rested on my soul for years,

And must be met." Then unto Ruth he turned :

" I go alone : abide thou with our kin."

But she arose and answered : " Nay, I go !

Forbid me not, or I must disobey,

Which were a cross. I give thee to the Lord,

His helpless instrument, to break or save ;

Think not my weakness shall confuse thy will ! "

Lars laid his hand upon her head, and all

Were strangely melted, though he spake no more,

Nor then, nor on the way to Graven lake.

Lo ! there were many gathered, kin of both,

Or friends, or folk acquainted with the tale,

And curious for its end. The summer sky

Was beautiful above them, and the trees

Stood happy, stretching forth forgiving arms ;

Yet sultry thunder in the hearts of men

Brooded, the menace of a rain of blood.

LARS:

Lars paused not when he came. He saw the face
Of Thorsten, ruddy, golden-haired like Per's,
Amid the throng, and straightway went to him
And spake: "I come, as thou invitest me.
My brother, I have shed thy brother's blood;
What wouldst thou I should do thee, to atone?"

"Give yours!" cried Thorsten, stepping back a pace.

"That murderous law we took from heathen sires,"
Said Lars, "is guilt upon a Christian land.
I do abjure it. Wilt thou have my blood,
Nor less, I dare not lift a hand for thine."

"You came not, then, to fight, though branded here
A coward?"

"Nay, nor ever," answered Lars;

"But, were I coward, could I calmly bear

Thy words?" Then Thorkil, friend of Thorsten,
cried

"These people, in their garments, I have heard,
Put on their peace ; or else some magic dwells
In shape of hat or color of the coat,
To make them harmless as a browsing hare.
That Lars we knew had danger in his eyes ;
But this one, — why, uncover, let us see !"
Therewith struck off the hat. And others there
Fell upon Lars, and tore away his coat,
Nor ceased the outrage until they had made
His body bare to where the leathern belt
Is clasped between the breast-bone and the hip.

Around his waist they buckled then a belt,
And brought a knife, and thrust it in his hand.
The open fingers would not hold : the knife
Fell from them, struck, and quivered in the sod.

Thorsten, apart, had also bared his breast,

And waited, beautiful in rosy life.

Then Thorkil and another drew the twain

Together, hooked the belts of each, and strove

Once more to arm the passive hand of Lars :

In vain : his open fingers would not hold

The knife, which fell and quivered in the sod.

He looked in Thorsten's eyes ; great sorrow fell

Upon him, and a tender human love.

" I did not this," he said ; " nor will resist.

If thou art minded so, then strike me dead :

But thou art sacred, for the blood I spilled

Is in thy veins, my brother : yea, all blood

Of all men sacred is in thee." His arms

Hung at his side : he did not shrink or sway :

His flesh touched Thorsten's where the belts were

joined,

And felt its warmth. Then twice did Thorsten lift

LARS.

His armed hand, and twice he let it sink :
An anguish came upon his face : he groaned,
And all that heard him marvelled at the words :
“ Have pity on me ; turn away thine eyes :
I cannot slay thee while they look on me ! ”

“ If I could end this bloody custom so,
In all the land, nor plant a late remorse
For what is here thy justice,” answered Lars,
“ I could not say thee nay. Yet, if the deed
Be good, thou shouldst have courage for the deed ! ”
Once more looked Thorsten in those loving eyes,
And shrank, and shuddered, and grew deadly pale,
Till, with a gasp for breath, as one who drowns
Draws, when he dips again above the wave,
He loosed the clutching belts, and sat him down
And hid his face : they heard him only say :
“ ’T were well that I should die, for very shame ! ”

LARS.

Lars heard, and spake to all: " The shame is mine,
Whose coward heart betrayed me unto guilt.
I slew my brother Per, nor sought his blood :
Thou, Thorsten, wilt not mine ; I read thy heart.
But ye, who trample on the soul of man
In still demanding he shall ne'er outgrow
The savage in his veins, through faith in Good,
Who Thorsten rule, even as ye ruled myself, —
I call ye to repent ! That God we left,
White Balder, were more merciful than this :
If one, henceforward, cast on Thorsten shame,
The Lord shall smite him when the judgment comes ! "

Never before, such words in such a place
Were preached by such apostle. Bared, as though
For runes of death, while red Berserker rage
Kindled in some, in others smouldered out,
He raised his hand and pointed to the sky :

Far off, behind the silent fells, there rolled
A sudden thunder. Ruth, who all the while
Moved not nor spake, stood forth, and o'er her face
There came the glory of an opening heaven.
Now that she knew the habit of the folk,
She spake not ; but she clothed the form of Lars
In silence, and the women, weeping, helped.
Then Thorsten rose, and seeing her, he said :
" Thou art his wife ; they tell me thou art good.
I am no bloodier than thy husband was
Before he knew thee : hast thou aught to say ? "
She took his hand and spake, as one inspired :
" Thou couldst not make thyself a man of blood !
This is thy seed of blessing : let it grow !
Gladness of heart, and peace, and honored name
Shall come to thee : the unrighteous, cruel law
Is broken by thy hands, no less than his
Who loves thee, and would sooner die than harm ! "

“ They speak the truth,” said Thorsten ; “ thou art
good,

And it were surely bitter grief to thee
If I had slain him. Go ! his blood is safe
From hands of mine.”

His words the most approved ;
The rest, bewildered, knew not what to say.
In these the stubborn mind and plastic heart
Agreed not quickly, for the thing was strange,
An olden tale with unforeboded end :
They must have time. The crowd soon fell apart,
Some faces glad, all solemn, and dispersed ;
Except one woman, who, from time to time,
Pressed forward, then, as with uncertain will,
Turned back as often. Troubled was her face
And worn : within the hollows of her eyes
Dwelt an impatient sorrow, and her lips
Had from themselves the girlish fulness pressed.

Her hair hung negligent, though plenteous still ;
 And beauty that no longer guards itself,
 But listlessly beholds its ruin come,
 Made her an apparition wild and sad,
 A cloud on others' joy.

Lars, as he left

That field unsullied, saw the woman stand.
 "Brita !" he cried ; and all the past returned
 And all the present mixed with it, and made
 His mouth to quiver and his eyes to fill :
 " Unhappy Brita, and I made thee so !
 Is there forgiveness yet for too much love
 And foolish faith, that brought us double woe ?
 I dare not ask it ; couldst thou give unasked ? "
 Her face grew hard to keep the something back
 Which softened her : " Make Per alive," she said,
 " One moment only, that he pardon me,
 And thou art pardoned ! else, I think, canst thou

Bear silence, as I bear it from the dead.

O, thou hast done me harm !” But Ruth addressed
These words to her : “ I never did thee harm,
Yet on my soul my husband’s guilt to thee
Is made a shadow : let me be thy friend !
Only a woman knows a woman’s need.”

Lars understood the gesture and the glance
Which Ruth then gave, and hastened on the path
To join his kindred, leaving them alone.
So Ruth by Brita walked, and spake to her
In words whose very sound a comfort gave,
Like some soft wind that o’er an arid land,
Unfelt at first, fans on with cooling wings
Till all the herbage freshens, and the soil
Is moist with dew ; and Brita’s arid heart
Thus opened : “ Yea, all this is very well.
So much thou knowest, being woman, — love

Of man, and man's of thee, and both declared :

But, say, how canst thou measure misery

Of love that lost its chances, made the Past

One dumbness, and forever reckons o'er

The words unspoken, which to both were sweet,

The touch of hands that never binding met,

The kisses, never given and never took,

The hopes and raptures that were never shared, —

Nay, worse than this, for she withheld, who knew

They might have been, from him who never
knew !”

Therewith her passion loosed itself in sobs,

And on the pitying breast of Ruth she wept

Her heart to calmness ; then, with less of pain,

She told the simple story of her life :

How, scarce two years before, her grandam died,

Who would have seen her wedded, and was wroth,

At times, in childish petulance of age,
But kinder — 't was a blessing ! — ere she died,
Leaving the cottage highest on the slope,
Naught else, to Brita ; but her wants were few.
The garden helped her, and the spotted cow,
Now old, indeed : she span the winter through,
And there was meal enough, and Thorsten gave
Sometimes a fish, because she grieved for Per ;
And, now the need of finery was gone, —
For men came not a-wooing where consent
Abode not, — she had made the least suffice.
Yes, she was lonely : it was better so,
For she must learn to live in loneliness.
As much as unto Ruth she had not said
To any woman, trusting her, it seemed,
Without a knowledge, more than them she knew.
“ Yea, trust me, Sister Brita ! ” Ruth replied,
“ And try to love : my heart is drawn to thee.”

LARS.

Thereafter, many a day, went Ruth alone
To Brita's cottage, vexing not with words
That woke her grief, and silent as to Lars,
Till Brita learned to smile when she appeared,
And missed her when she came not. Now, meanwhile,
The news of Lars, and Thorsten's foiled revenge
Beside the lake of Graven, travelled far
Past Vik and Vossevangen, o'er the fells,
To all the homesteads of the Bergenstift ;
And every gentle heart leaped up in joy,
While those of restless old Berserker blood
Beat hot with wrath. Who oversets old laws,
They said, is dangerous ; and who is he
That dares to preach, and hath not been ordained?
This thing concerns the ministers, they whom
The State sets over us, with twofold power,
Divine and secular, to teach and rule.
Then he, the shepherd of the Ulvik flock,

LARS.

Not now that good old man, but one whose youth
More hateful showed his Christless bigotry,
Made Sabbaths hot with his anathemas
Of Lars, and stirred a tumult in the land.
Some turned away, and all grew faint of heart,
Seeing the foothold yield, and slip ; till Lars,
Now shunned at home, and drawn by messages
From Gustaf Hansen and the faithful souls
In Arendal, said : " It is time to go."

"Nay, tarry but a little while," spake Ruth.
"I have my purpose here, as thou hadst thine :
Grant me but freedom, for the end, I think,
Is justified."

Lars answered : "Have thy will!"

She summoned Brita, and the twain went down
To pace the scanty strand beside the wave,

LARS.

Which, after storm, was quiet, though the gloom
Of high, opposing mountains filled the fiord.

Ruth spake of parting ; Brita answered not,

But up and down in silence walked the strand,

Then suddenly : "No message sendeth Lars ?

My pardon he implored ; and that, to thee,

I know, were welcome. Hadst thou asked, perchance,

Perverse in sorrow, I should still withhold ;

But thou departest, who hast been so kind,

And I — ah, God ! what else have I to give ?"

"The Lord requite thee, Brita !" Ruth exclaimed ;

"The gift that blesses must be given unasked :

What now remains, is easy. Come with us,

With Lars and me, and be our home thy home,

All peace we win, all comfort, thine as ours !"

Once more walked Brita up and down the strand,

Bowing her face upon her shielding hands,

As if to muse, unwatched ; then stood, and seemed
About to speak, when, with a shrilling cry
She sprang, and fell, and grovelled on her knees,
And thrust her fingers in the wet sea-sand.
Ruth, all in terror, ran to her, and saw
How, from the bones of some long-wasted fish
An osprey dropped, or tempest beat to death,
Caught in the breakers, and the drifted shells,
And tangles of the rotting kelp, she plucked
Something that sparkled, pressed it to her lips,
And cried : " A sign ! a sign ! 't is grandam speaks !"
Then trembling rose, and flung herself on Ruth,
And kissed her, saying : " I will follow thee.
My heart assented, yet I had denied,
But, ere I spake, the miracle was done !
Thy words give back the jewel lost with Per :
Tell Lars I do forgive him, and will serve
Thee, Ruth, a willing handmaid, in thy home !"

So Brita went with them to Arendal.

There milder habits, easier government

Of bench and pulpit for a while left all

In peace : and not alone within the fold

Of Friends came Brita, but the Lord inspired.

She spake with power, as one by suffering taught

A chastened spirit, and she wrought good works.

She was a happy matron ere she died,

And blessing came on all ; for, from that day

Of doubt and anguish by the Graven lake,

The Lord fulfilled in Ruth one secret prayer,

And gave her children ; and the witness borne

By Lars, the voice of his unsprinkled blood,

Became a warning on Norwegian hills.

Here, now, they fade. The purpose of their lives

Was lifted up, by something over life,

To power and service. Though the name of Lars

LARS.

Be never heard, the healing of the world
Is in its nameless saints. Each separate star
Seems nothing, but a myriad scattered stars
Break up the Night, and make it beautiful.

THE END.





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